HEATH McCOY

PAIN AND PASSION

THE HISTORY OF

STAMPEDE WRESTLING

REVISED and EXPANDED EDITION

HEATH McCOY

PAIN AND PASSION

ECW PRESS

Praise for *Pain and Passion*

Pain and Passion: the most accurate and unbiased wrestling book I've ever read.

— Lance Storm

Pain and Passion joyfully recreates the colourful cast of characters — and the chaos — that made Stampede Wrestling so much fun.

— Greg Oliver, author, *The Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame: The Heels*

Pain and Passion is an awesome book. I couldn't put the book down and would rank it with any wrestling book ever written. Brutally honest ... neither exploitive nor apologetic about the subject.... The depth of getting into so many of the key personalities and stories is amazing. Stampede Wrestling may have never been the biggest wrestling promotion in the world, but it very well may have been the most interesting.

— Dave Meltzer, editor, *Wrestling Observer*

Heath McCoy's *Pain and Passion* drags the reader out of the squared circle for a piledriving peek at the characters of Stampede Wrestling. Warts-and-all stories are spooled out in an engaging and unflinching manner — rich with detail, ripe with deceit. A ring-a-ding-dong-dandy about a true Calgary institution.

— Scott Cruickshank, *Calgary Herald*

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STAMPEDE WRESTLING
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ECW

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To Grampa, because I've always loved watching wrestling with you; Gramma for not making us change the channel; and to Mom and Dad, who were the best parents a kid could have (despite your lousy rules).

To my late brother, Jay (the only one of us kids brave enough to ask for Bad News Allen's autograph). I miss the hell out of you and I think about you every day.

And to my wife, Tamara. No one knows how much personal pain and passion went into this book like you do. Thanks for getting me through it. I love you.

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Mike Mooneyham was also superb when it came to understanding WWE.

In December 2004 I wrote a story on the great villains of Stampede Wrestling for the *Calgary Herald*'s in-house magazine, *Swerve*. That netted me a Western Canada Magazine Award and gave me confidence that I was on to something special with this book, so I tip my hat to *Swerve* editor Shelley Youngblut.

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Introduction

When I was eleven years old, I wanted to be Dynamite Kid. Even when he was one of the bad guys, committing heinous acts against my other idol, Bret Hart, I secretly worshipped the tough, cocky Englishman who moved with the agility of Spider-Man in the wrestling ring.

In the early 1980s, I watched *Stampede Wrestling* religiously, glued to the TV every Saturday afternoon in the living room of my Saskatoon home. When the show was over, I'd snatch my little brother and re-enact the matches, with him as my crash test dummy. Poor kid. In the schoolyard, my friends and I played Stampede Wrestling at recess, pretending to be the stars of the Calgary-based promotion, imitating the down-home play-by-plays of announcer Ed Whalen as we hammered on each other. "Off those ropes! Look out, Nellie! It's a malfunction at the junction!"

I was the runt of my class then, neither good at nor particularly taken with most sports. Comic books were my passion, which never makes one the most popular kid in school. But where wrestling was concerned, I bonded with my classmates. All the boys were hooked on the wild brawls and zany theatre-meets-sports soap opera that the famed Hart family concocted each week. And pro wrestling was perfectly in keeping with my love of comic books. The Hart boys, Dynamite Kid, Davey Boy Smith – they were like superheroes come to life.

Every so often, my dad and my grandpa took me to the Monday night matches too, when Stampede Wrestling came to the Saskatoon Arena. Grandpa had been watching wrestling since the 1950s and he was still a big fan. When things got too far out or bloody, Gramps would assure me the action

was fake, though he didn't seem to believe that himself when he'd howl with indignation at the villains' wicked ways: "That son-of-a-bitch is cheating!"

For several generations on the Canadian Prairies, Stu Hart's Stampede Wrestling was an institution: a staple of the pop culture diet for hundreds of thousands of fans. But the show's influence was far more than just regional. In the late 1980s, it was broadcast across the country on TSN (The Sports Network). Over the decades, bootleg tapes of *Stampede Wrestling* were broadcast in up to thirty countries around the world. Some of the most famous wrestlers of all time emerged from the promotion, from Gene Kiniski and Superstar Billy Graham (Hulk Hogan's forefather) to Bret and Owen Hart, the British Bulldogs, and current superstar Chris Benoit. From its remote neck of the woods in Western Canada, Stampede Wrestling helped shape the wrestling world into the multimillion-dollar mega-industry it is today.

Even though the modern mat game has become too flash-over-substance for my liking – dominated as it is by Vince McMahon's media colossus, WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) – I'm still a wrestling fan. Wrestling has always had a crude, trashy nature. It's part of the fun, and I don't share the opinion of the legions of critics (including the Hart family) who blast WWE on moral grounds. Yes, McMahon has upped the trash-ante with bottom-feeding gimmicks, beer-guzzling anti-heroes, overt sexual innuendo, and a bevy of half-naked women he tries to pass off as wrestlers. But to me, the spectacle is not that far removed from the typical heavy metal concert, and I love a good heavy metal concert.

But I do think the game has lost something special, and I miss the heyday of Stampede Wrestling. There was something so pure about the product. Yes, it was showbiz too. Character-driven, with predetermined matches, of course Stampede Wrestling was contrived. But not nearly like WWE is today. WWE has become the wrestling equivalent of the most bloated arena rock concert. It's a slick, larger-than-life dose of maximum, big-budget entertainment. But it has also gotten too predictable, over-the-top to the point of ridiculousness, and far too showy for its own good. WWE is so bogged down by the frills that it has lost its heart.

Stampede Wrestling, on the other hand, had a real honky-tonk spirit. Low-budget, down-and-dirty production that it was, with weekly brawls in barn-like arenas across the West, it was all heart. It is like the difference between the Rolling Stones of today, with their perfectly choreographed extravaganzas, and the raw, dynamic blues-rock band the Stones used to be.

On paper, WWE offers more bang for the buck, while Stampede Wrestling could be a rather sloppy, low-rent affair. But the latter felt a lot more

genuine, and when Stampede was on a roll, it produced some of the greatest pro wrestling in the history of the game. The wild matches. The kooky angles. The spectacular performers. Stampede Wrestling had it all.

As it was a Prairie production, not rooted in the big media centres of Montreal or Toronto, the Stampede Wrestling story was never chronicled in the way it deserved to be. I felt that was a shame. The promotion was a cultural institution in the West, and its influence was felt across the pro wrestling world. From the action in the ring to the captivating behind-the-scenes story that propelled that action, I see the Stampede Wrestling story as a wild and woolly, rock 'n' roll saga. It's a comedy and a tragedy all at once. Over fifty years in the making, it's a largely undocumented chapter in the history of Canadian pop culture. It needed to be documented, and that's what I've set out to do here.

I quickly came to realize that I wasn't merely telling a story about wrestling for wrestling fans. Rather, I was telling a touching human tale about the people in the extraordinary Stampede Wrestling world and the family that grew up at the helm of the crazy business, for better and for worse.

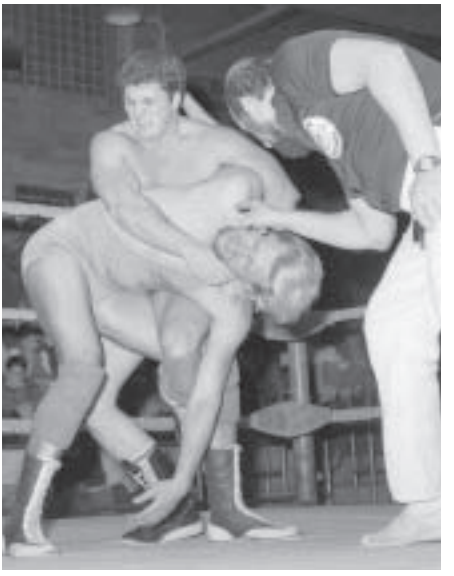
This book doesn't pull any punches in the telling of this history, but it is meant as a tribute to those characters and the wonderfully deranged drama they created. As ol' Ed Whalen liked to say, in his own hokey but lovable way, it made for a real "ring-a-ding-dong dandy."

Heath McCoy
Calgary 2005

KING of SPORTS
NEW JAPAN PRO WRESTLING

Chapter one

Mutiny and the Sinking of Stampede Wrestling



It was *Lord of the Flies* on steroids. But unlike little boys with spears stranded on a deserted island, this scene featured overgrown hulks – Stampede wrestlers – armed with crushing muscle power and driven wild by the scent of blood, like a school of sharks. As in the classic novel, they had turned on one of their own.

Bruce Hart, thirty-nine, the son of famed wrestling promoter Stu Hart, looked out on the lynch mob surrounding the vehicle in which he had locked himself for safety. There was no talking his way out of this jam. He felt a sharp, throbbing ache in his freshly busted jaw. Outside the van – which earlier that day had hauled the mob to this arena parking lot in Yellowknife (or Hay River, depending on who recalls the incident) – the wrestlers circled hungrily. The wildest of the lot were stoked on steroids, booze, and various drugs, from painkillers to cocaine. They hammered on the windows, kicking and violently rocking the vehicle, taunting their prey, challenging him to come out and play.

Bruce, paralyzed with fear next to his panicked assistant, the hapless Bob Johnson, a family friend and wrestling cling-on, knew he was in for one mother of a beating. As the booker and boss's son, he was the acting chief on this wrestling tour, but there was no way he was going to step out of the van. He had been around wrestlers all his life, and he knew full well he was past the point of restoring order.

Opposite page: Another gonzo night behind the scenes in Stampede Wrestling: Dynamite Kid and Duke Myers get crazy, early 1980s. Top: While his impact on Stampede Wrestling was primarily felt as a trainer, booker, and producer of the TV show, Ross Hart also stepped into the ring occasionally. Here, he gives Drago Zhivago an abdominal stretch, 1980s.

These goons had travelled over a thousand miles, coming from Calgary. For a good portion of the trip, eighteen of them had been packed like gigantic slabs of beef in one van, with no air conditioning, in the sweltering summer heat. It was a nightmare for everybody involved, Bruce thought, but at the moment there was nothing to be done about it. Instead of trying to make the best of a bad situation, those bastards were lashing out, looking for someone to blame. He couldn't believe things had descended into such ugliness, into this cheap, hell ride to the middle of nowhere, where the freaks had taken over the circus.

His father's Calgary-based wrestling promotion, Stampede Wrestling, had been a western Canadian institution since 1948, forty-one years ago. The television show had been syndicated across North America and, thanks to bootleg tapes, had been seen in as many as thirty countries. Wrestling fans from around the globe knew about Stampede Wrestling. It had spawned some of the biggest wrestling stars in the world. Bruce's own brother Bret Hart was one of them. The famed British Bulldogs, Dynamite Kid and Davey Boy Smith, former tag team champions of the world, were another two. Ironically, it was the Bulldogs leading this mutiny.

Such was the wrestling business that you could be on top one day – a face on network TV, a main event star in the biggest arenas in the world – and the next day you were back in the shithouse, trudging along on tours like this one. In a matter of months, the Bulldogs had gone from first-class flights to this garbage run through the Northwest Territories, and they weren't happy about it.

Tom Billington – Dynamite Kid – was at the forefront of the attack. He was volatile, malicious, the loosest canon of the bunch. Billington was seconded by his steroid-raging cousin, the 245-pound Davey Boy Smith. It's not clear who rounded out the mob that descended on the van, though the Stampede Wrestling roster at the time included a young Chris Benoit, who is today one of the biggest wrestling stars in the world; former football player Lethal Larry Cameron; "The Angel of Death" Dave Sheldon; Johnny Smith; Ron Ritchie; and Goldie Rogers. Some of them may have looked on in horror, helpless as the scene unfolded.

Bruce believes some of the wrestlers were sympathetic to his plight, but they weren't willing to chance becoming targets themselves. "Usually [the gang would] pick up on whoever was the weak one in the herd and all the hyenas would jump on him and start ripping at him, tearing him apart until he snapped and cracked," remembers Benoit of his early days on the road as a Stampede wrestler.

Dynamite knocked threateningly on the driver's window and demanded Bruce roll it down. "[He] looked scared to death," Billington recalls in his autobiography *Pure Dynamite*. Bruce had good reason to be petrified. It was only a matter of time before the blood-thirsty Dynamite Kid came crashing through the glass.

It never happened. Someone had called the police. Bruce welcomed the shrill whine of their sirens that pierced the night. "They told Dynamite to cool it and he started threatening them," Bruce says. "He told them to fuck off. He was drunk, disorderly, stoned. He was almost trying to lead a riot [against the police]." As the RCMP restrained Dynamite, Bruce and Johnson got out of the van and headed for the hospital, where Bruce's jaw was wired shut. "That was a trip to remember," Bruce says bitterly. "Kind of like the *Titanic*."

What fuelled this ugly mutiny? What caused these men to lash out so violently against the boss's son? The answer is impossible to grasp without a taste of the filth these wrestlers wallowed in on their journey.

The Stampede Wrestling circuit had always been a harsh road. For over four decades, the revolving-door roster would do the loop, week after never-ending week. There was the Friday night show in Calgary for the TV taping. Then it was off to Edmonton, Saskatoon, Regina, Lethbridge, Red Deer, one night after another, sleazy motel to sleazy motel, and then back to Calgary to do it all again. Somehow they would squeeze in the smaller centres, too. Taber, Swift Current, Milk River, Tisdale, various Indian reservations, any gopher hole across the Prairies would do – wherever paying, screaming, fist-shaking wrestling fans were to be found. Cancelling shows was not an option. There could be a blinding blizzard. The roads could be glare ice. The junky van could be falling apart on the highway. It didn't matter. You made the shows or you weren't paid.

And every few months, the loop veered out, touching down in centres across British Columbia and Manitoba. The northern territories – Alaska, Montana, Washington – they were hit as well at one time or another. During the late 1980s, Stampede Wrestling was broadcast across Canada on TSN, The Sports Network, and the Harts decided to take advantage of that, increasingly venturing outside the regular Saskatchewan-Alberta loop. That's why, in the summer of 1989, Bruce had booked this cursed trip to the Northwest Territories.

Milad Elzein, who was performing as the evil Arab wrestling manager Abu Wizal, had missed this particular trek, but he knows exactly what would have

happened and why: "I'm not proud to say it, but we were a bunch of junkies back then. [We took] pain pills, marijuana, cocaine, anything we could get our hands on. Tommy was into pill-popping. I can't even imagine all the pills him and Davey took."

No one remembers how many towns were hit or how many days they had been on the road, but everyone remembers the trip as one long, foul ordeal. At first, there had been two vans. The villains, or heels, generally rode together, the so-called good guys travelling in the "babyface" van. Some of the seats were torn and broken, wobbling in their bases. There were holes in the floor. In one van, the liner had been ripped from the ceiling. The cabs reeked with the rotten smell of body odour and sweat, stale beer, and cigarettes, the odd belch or fart fired into the mix for comedic relief. Somebody had also pissed in the back of one of the wagons.

And the farther north the caravan travelled, the more uninviting the roads. "These big semis would come up from behind and you'd have to pull over and let them by. Then you'd wait for all the dust to settle down," Johnson remembers. "You'd be travelling along and all of a sudden that's the end of the road. There's a lake there. You'd have to wait a half hour for the barge to come along and take you across.... Then you'd travel another fifty kilometres and hit another lake and you'd wait for the next barge."

Bruce Hart remembers obscenely fat bumblebees and the kamikaze horseflies splattered on the windshield, and the deer, antelope, and porcupines that sauntered onto the road. "There were buffaloes up there that looked like they were on steroids," he says. "They'd roam around the highway not yielding to anyone. They'd stroll across the road and give you this look like, 'Ahh, fuck you. I'll let you go when I feel like it.'"

Dynamite Kid and Davey Boy Smith had only recently returned to the Stampede Wrestling circuit after a phenomenal four-year run in the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). Its WrestleMania was considered the Super Bowl of the wrestling world, and the Bulldogs had appeared on three of the cards. In one, in which they won the WWF World Tag Team titles, heavy metal star Ozzy Osbourne stood in their corner. For that single match, the British Bulldogs were paid $20,000 each.

They had children's toys made of their likenesses. They were on posters, collector's cards, and all manner of merchandising. They made more money then they ever thought they'd see in their lives, enough that Dynamite was able to pay cash for a $220,000 eighteen-acre ranch outside Calgary for him and his wife. And as they had become stars of network television, the

Bulldogs appeared in public service announcements, preaching, hypocritically, to the kiddies about the virtues of clean living. They even made a guest appearance on the hit TV action series *The A-Team*.

These were but a few of the perks to be had when you were two of the top stars in the WWF. That organization, run by Vince McMahon Jr., had changed the face of professional wrestling. For decades, the North American wrestling scene had been divided into multiple territories, such as Stu Hart's western Canadian promotion. Each promoter had his own slice of land, his own kingdom as it were, and he controlled the wrestling cards in that territory. While they did swap talent, and occasionally do co-promotions, it was rare that promoters crossed into each other's territory. When that did happen, it usually provoked a territorial war and the aggressor would find himself blacklisted in the industry.

But McMahon didn't follow the rules. Instead, he finagled a national presence for himself on network TV and in the world of pay-per-view. He defied the territorial boundaries, booking shows in every territory across the country, poaching each organization's top talents while he was at it. McMahon orchestrated high-profile tie-ins with the rock world via Cyndi Lauper and MTV. He boasted the superhero-like Hulk Hogan as his top champion, a megastar who crossed over to the mainstream when he appeared in *Rocky* III with Sylvester Stallone.

McMahon epitomized the flash-over-substance '80s. It was a decade in which a Hollywood star became president of the United States, the marketing images in a rock video became more important than the music, and blockbuster movies reigned supreme. It was a decade punctuated by unparalleled corporate greed, a time tailor-made for a figure like McMahon, and he prospered, turning his father's Connecticut- and New York–based territory into a global multimedia empire that brought professional wrestling to the masses in a way that Stu Hart never dreamed possible. The WWF was impossible to compete with. The old wrestling territories seemed like small potatoes next to its big-budget cartoon flash. As their fans abandoned them, the territories toppled one after another.

Despite its superb talent roster and loyal fan base, Stampede Wrestling had also fallen on hard times financially. Stu Hart was considering selling the business in 1984 when Vince McMahon came along, looking to break into the western Canadian market. Rather than fighting what was probably a losing battle – with its grassroots production values and single camera TV tapings, how could Stampede hope to compete? – Stu sold McMahon the promoting rights to his territory. The deal called for Stu to be paid $100,000 a

Abdullah the Butcher (left) and the Dynamite Kid during a tour of Japan, early 1980s.

year for ten years, plus 10 percent of the gate from all house shows in Calgary and Edmonton. Stu, in turn, would give McMahon his TV spots across Western Canada.[1] Another stipulation was that McMahon hire the top talents of Stampede Wrestling, including Stu's son Bret Hart, his sons-in-law Jim Neidhart and Davey Boy Smith, and Dynamite Kid.

Cousins Dynamite and Davey had been Stampede Wrestling icons during the early 1980s. Dynamite, who came from the poor English coal mining town of Wigan, had been wrestling since he was a teenager. It was Bruce Hart who brought him to Calgary in 1978 when he was only nineteen years old. At first, Stu was reluctant, believing the kid – who then stood five-foot-eight and weighed no more than 170 pounds – to be a runt. Surely he'd be squashed by the hulks of the wrestling game.

But Dynamite soon turned the promotion, which was doing lukewarm business in the late 1970s, on its head. Nobody had seen moves like his, and the fans were excited again. This little runt was a draw, bringing folks back into the arenas by the hundreds. A fearless acrobat, he launched himself across the ring when hit, making his opponents look like supermen. When he was bounced off the ropes or given a simple hip toss, he flew like a crash-test dummy shot from a cannon. On the offensive, he sprang at his foes like a panther.

Dynamite was genuinely tough, too. Even though the outcomes of bouts were generally predetermined and the punches pulled, it wasn't uncommon for the boys to get rough with each other. Despite his size, Dynamite quickly made it clear that he could hold his own. He was fast, strong, and prone to sharp, violent outbursts. He had a complex about his size, an insecurity he carried like a demon on his shoulder, and when he felt slighted in any way, when the trigger was pulled on his temper, Dynamite was someone to be feared. He loved being feared. Being "a hard man," as the Brits call it, was everything to Dynamite. "Win, lose, or draw," he used to boast; he'd never back down from anybody. Once he discovered steroids, eventually bulking up to almost 230 pounds, he became more volatile and dangerous than ever.

Davey Boy Smith, from Manchester, arrived in Calgary in 1981. Four years younger than Dynamite, he worshiped his cousin and tried to emulate him in every way. Although he lacked Dynamite's mean streak, fearlessness, and talent for innovation, Smith was an exceptionally gifted athlete and his star power was obvious. Pin-up-boy handsome with a warm look in his eyes, Davey Boy became a favourite with the female fans. They cried when the bad guys beat on him. He could fly almost as high as Dynamite, too, and once he got on steroids, or "the juice" as the boys called it, he developed a massive build that Dynamite, to his chagrin, could never match.

While Dynamite and Davey Boy had been cast as bitter foes throughout most of their Stampede run, McMahon recreated them as a team, the British Bulldogs, and their hard, fast, acrobatic style left spectators awestruck. But the dream soon crumbled. First, Dynamite's high-impact style caught up with him, and he ruptured two discs in his back. The Bulldogs were forced to drop their title belts. It was the beginning of a steady physical decline that would eventually end Dynamite's revolutionary career.

To make matters worse, the Bulldogs' were living at a punishing pace, wrestling well over three hundred nights a year, never taking time off to let their injuries heal. On the road, they partied like decadent rock stars – nightly booze binges, some of the wrestlers smoking crack cocaine after the matches.[2] Along with his regular intake of steroids – up to 1,200 milligrams of testosterone injected into his buttocks daily[3] – Dynamite was becoming increasingly reliant on a number of addictive substances. Of his WWF years, he writes: "A normal working day for me was: speed to wake me up in the morning to catch an early flight, Valium to make me sleep on the plane, Percoset just before the match, then we'd wrestle, hit the beer, and the cocaine, until the early hours, before taking another Valium to put me to sleep at night."[4]

The Bulldogs became notorious in WWF dressing rooms for their malicious pranks. Dynamite had long been fond of slipping Ex-Lax into the wrestlers' coffee, often causing them to have embarrassing accidents just about the time they hit the ring. Wayne Farris, who wrestled in both Stampede Wrestling and the WWF as a sleazy Elvis wannabe named the Honky Tonk Man, says the Bulldogs once slipped a sleeping pill into wrestler Outback Jack's drink. They then shaved off all his hair, including his eyebrows, stripped him naked, and stuck him in an elevator, sending him down to the hotel lobby.

"I seen him terrorize people," Honky Tonk says of his experiences with Dynamite in the WWF dressing room. One day, a French Canadian wrestler named Jacques Rougeau Jr. blamed Dynamite when he found his clothing in tatters after a match. Dynamite swore he was innocent and attacked Rougeau later that evening, sucker-punching him while he was playing cards in the dressing room. Weeks later, in retaliation, Jacques and his brother Raymond blind-sided Dynamite, who claims Jacques was wearing a pair of brass knuckles. Dynamite lost four teeth and his mouth was torn to shreds.[5] "He got exactly what he deserved," says Honky Tonk. Although McMahon tried to patch things up, Dynamite was always on bad terms with the WWF after that incident, and it wasn't long before the Bulldogs left the organization.

Meanwhile, back in Calgary, the Harts were running Stampede Wrestling again, having revived the promotion in 1985. Surprisingly, the WWF juggernaut had encountered a backlash in Alberta. The group's early live events in the province proved to be a financial disappointment. Fans had turned away in droves at least in part out of loyalty to the local wrestling they missed so much.[6] McMahon, who wasn't making money in the territory, wanted out of his agreement with Stu, saying it wasn't feasible for him. He told Stu he was free to start up Stampede Wrestling again. Stu agreed to the new deal, and Stampede Wrestling was back in business.

After the Bulldogs left the WWF, it was natural that they return to Stampede Wrestling. But Dynamite was no longer the same man who had once set the promotion ablaze. He couldn't get over his loss to Rougeau. He couldn't accept that another man had beaten him down, that he might be lesser in the eyes of his boys. His reputation as the hardest man in the ring had been compromised. Somebody had stood up against his tyranny and won. It preyed on Dynamite, eating away at his pride like acid, driving him nearly insane with bitterness.

"After the incident with Rougeau, I think Tommy felt the need to reclaim his invincibility," says Ross Hart, another son of Stu who worked behind the scenes training and doing TV production. "Suddenly, he didn't feel like the toughest guy on the block anymore."

Ego-bruised and drug-crazed, Dynamite returned to Stampede Wrestling in the early part of 1989 on the condition that he become head booker for the territory. Working with the promoter, the booker formulates the show's storylines and determines the outcome of the matches. Who will get the big push and win a title belt? Who will wrestle babyface and who will wrestle heel? The booker calls all these shots, and Dynamite wanted the gig.

Bruce Hart had been the main booker since Stampede reopened in the fall of '85, but Stu sensed it was time for a change. At his best, Bruce was a fantastic ideas man, years ahead of his time. Corrupt referees. Rebellious heroes who were borderline villains. Creepy monster heels who were in league with the forces of the occult. These concepts would all make the WWF millions of dollars in the years to come, and Bruce was beating them to the punch on it. The fans loved the twisted angles Bruce dreamed up.

But Stu disagreed with the way his son managed the business. The wrestlers found Bruce manipulative and backstabbing. They didn't like the way he played dressing room politics. Bruce had his favourites, the wrestlers claimed, and he held grudges, too. You'd be his chosen star one day, destined for the main event matches. But if you didn't suck up to him, or if you fell

on his bad side, your character would founder. Of course, this is a common complaint against bookers in the wrestling world. The booker is the man calling the shots, and it's a rare booker who makes everyone in the dressing room happy.

Another concern Stu had about Bruce was that he couldn't bring order to the road. Wrestlers had always partied, fought, and screwed their way around the circuit; they always played crazy ribs on one another. Under Bruce's watch, though, the situation often bordered on chaos.

But in the eyes of the boys, Bruce's greatest sin was his ego, using his power as the booker to cast himself as one of the promotion's top heroes. He was always putting himself over as a champion babyface, constantly trumping the biggest, baddest heels. Bruce was five-foot-nine and probably less then 200 pounds (though he was billed as being 212), and his physique was nothing special. Many of the boys took exception to having to be beaten by Bruce match after match. This punk didn't look the part of a champion, they grumbled, arguing that it was bad for business. How could the fans buy into it?

Stu often shared such reservations about Bruce, according to wrestler Gama Singh. "Stu hated that Bruce always had five or six heels in the corner [of the ring] and they all had weapons and Bruce would go into that corner and beat the hell out of these guys." Stu didn't think it was believable coming from Bruce. Stu was passionate that the action inside the ring look real. The fans had to buy into every move. However, it's not uncommon for bookers who also wrestle to cast themselves as stars. And it's hard to deny that the fans loved Bruce. Even though his ring skills didn't come close to those of Dynamite Kid, he was a solid performer who knew how to work a crowd. That didn't matter to the wrestlers, who griped that the only reason he had got where he was in the game was because he was the boss's brat. So Stu relieved Bruce of his booking duties and when Dynamite, swinging his star clout, demanded the job, he got it.

But according to Ross Hart, Dynamite's booking was disastrous. "He was awful," Ross says. "He was a great wrestler, a great performer, but his booking concepts were terrible. It was just a lot of gimmicks – let's have a cage match, let's have a street match – and it was quite often built around ill-conceived storylines. Storylines need to be developed over a period of time and, with Tommy, he was just hot-shotting, trying to do these things instantaneously. You might attract fans for a while, but then there's nothing to follow it with, and a lot of the matches were poorly received."

In April, Dynamite took a month off to wrestle in Japan. When he returned, he found that Stu had handed the reins back to Bruce. "Dynamite

wasn't the performer he had been, at that point," Ross says. "He wasn't making the effort anymore and he was pretty battered up with all his injuries. He was never the same after his back surgery. I think he was having trouble coming to terms with the reality that his career was spiralling downward. Then he got the slap in the face of being replaced as a booker, the commander, by Bruce.... I don't think Tommy could accept that.... He basically plotted and established the first mutiny he could."

Bruce Hart was taking his turn driving on the Yellowknife trek. A Japanese wrestler who went by the name of Sumu Hara was riding shotgun, while Dynamite, Davey Boy, and the other wrestlers partied in the back.

"Me and this Japanese guy were the only guys in that van who were not completely plastered," Bruce says. "Everyone else was drunk or stoned. Dynamite came up and he kept trying to offer me a beer. I don't mind having a beer, but not while I'm driving, so I said 'No, it's okay.' But he started getting insistent ... which was immediately a tip-off to me. They were getting almost belligerent and obnoxious about it, so finally, for a peaceful co-existence, I said okay. I faked drinking it a bit and then passed it to the Japanese guy."

As Bruce had suspected, the beer was spiked. That was clear when the gang pulled over for gas in Fox Creek, about two and a half hours northwest of Edmonton, and Sumu Hara was "so fucked up he literally couldn't crawl out of the van." Bruce turned to Dynamite and Davey and snapped, "I'm driving, you imbeciles! If I had drunk that beer, what the hell do you think would've happened? This is a two-lane stretch of highway. We could've hit a semi head-on!" "They just gave me this fuck-you type of look," Bruce says.

About an hour later, the van blew its engine, forcing all eighteen wrestlers to squeeze together in the second van, their travel cases perched on their knees. As the summer heat rose to scorching temperatures, so too did the tension. The van began to feel like an oven. Bruce, having taken his turn at the wheel, climbed into Johnson's Thunderbird, hoping to lighten the load in the van. On the bright side, Bruce says, that night's show in Yellowknife was stellar.

The next evening, as Bruce remembers, the tour hit Hay River, a town of thirty-five hundred, a couple of hours' drive southwest of Yellowknife. Bruce had to arrive early for a radio interview he had scheduled to promote the night's match. Again he caught a ride with Johnson. He invited several of the wrestlers to ride with him, but nobody wanted to get up earlier than they had to.

The trouble began that evening. The show was supposed to kick off at 7:30 PM, but none of the other wrestlers had arrived except the ring

veteran Bulldog Bob Brown and his nephew, Kerry Brown, who had driven up on their own. Irate, Bruce started the show almost half an hour late, squaring off against the chunky 275-pounder Kerry Brown. Bruce and Kerry fought for forty-five minutes – "way too long for an opening match," Bruce says. "Luckily, this was a virgin crowd and they were fairly tolerant." After stalling for a time, Bruce hit the ring again, this time with Bulldog Bob. "I came up with this bogus pretext where he said I cheated to beat Kerry or some bullshit," Bruce says.

When the others finally arrived, Bruce stormed into the dressing room. Bruce says he confronted Dynamite for being late, which Dynamite took exception to. Dynamite claims he encountered a cocky Hart "grinning like a Cheshire cat," taking pleasure in how awful the road trip had been for those in the van.[7] Drunken Dynamite threw an iron fist, belting Bruce in the jaw. Bruce claims Davey Boy followed up the assault with a headbutt to the teeth. Pandemonium ensued as Bruce went down, the wrestlers gathering around like frenzied gorillas. They wanted blood.

Dynamite stormed toward the ring to wrestle his match. On the way, he swung a punch at Johnson, who was acting as ring announcer, clocking him in front of the fans. After the match, Dynamite returned to the dressing room for another stab at Bruce. That's when Bruce and Johnson dashed to the van and locked themselves inside.

It's still not clear exactly why the wrestlers were so late arriving that evening. Dynamite claimed that a rock hit the van's windshield, smashing it out, and that the van got another flat tire. Bruce doesn't buy it. He heard another story from some of the more innocent wrestlers on the trip. "They were all drinking and fucking around in Yellowknife that night, and they didn't leave until at least 5 PM," Bruce says. "They had been chasing whatever women were up there, and finally they set off all hammered. About forty miles outside of town, Dynamite got this brilliant idea to give them an excuse for being late and he kicked the windshield out of the van.... So the big excuse was that a rock hit the windshield.... The whole thing blew up in their faces though, 'cause now they're riding along and getting pelted by these bees and horseflies."

When the van blew its tire, the motley crew was out of luck. The boys had thrown out the spare to make room in the cab. Bruce thinks they may have hitchhiked into Hay River. "I couldn't believe that adults would actually do things this stupid," Bruce says of the whole sordid scene.

When word of the absurd misadventure reached Stu Hart in Calgary, he was disgusted. Once he could have dealt with this anarchy, but at the age of

seventy-four, he just didn't have it in him. He hadn't signed up for this when he broke into pro wrestling in the mid-1940s. It was no longer the game he loved. Steroids and a pharmacy of other drugs had ruined the business. Stu had dealt with his share of wild men – egos, tempers, the boozers, the losers – but things had come unglued. Each week there was a crisis.

His wife Helen – his pretty little "Tiger Belle" – certainly wasn't up to it anymore, either. This type of nonsense was sapping her strength. She had never wanted to be in this lousy business to begin with, but she had been Stu's partner for forty years. She had balanced the books, signed the cheques, dealt with irate wrestlers, social misfits, so many crazies. She charmed them all, too. She could charm anybody. But lately, she was just tired. Every day, she begged Stu to get out of the business.

That certainly seemed like the best idea. Despite the kinks behind the scenes, Stampede Wrestling remained a quality product, and with the success of its graduates on the world stage it was more renowned than ever. Raw and rough, it was a treat for the pro wrestling lover. And yet, it was losing its battle with the glamour and glitz of the WWF. Every time Stampede developed a big name, that son of a bitch McMahon snatched him for his own increasingly bloated show. The Bulldogs, Bad News Allen, Honky Tonk Man, even Stu's own sons Bret and Owen – all of them had done stints in the WWF.

The WWF wasn't the paradise it was made out to be, as far as Stu was concerned. It didn't necessarily make one's career. Owen, his youngest son, was already planning to leave McMahon. That kid could fly like Dynamite and he could wrestle a good meat-and-potatoes technical match down on the mat with the best of them. And he had a lot of charisma. In many ways, he was the best wrestler of all the Hart sons. He was an instant sensation in Stampede Wrestling. But he was young, competing with the world's biggest talents in the WWF, and McMahon wasn't about to push him as a main event star until he proved himself at the bottom of the card. Fair enough. Owen would have to work his way to the top like everybody else.

But McMahon dressed Owen up with another one of his cockamamie concepts. They made him a masked wrestler called the Blue Blazer, a superhero who came to the ring in a goofy feathered cape. It was as cheesy as could be, and the fans knew it. Their response to the Blue Blazer was lukewarm, and if you weren't exciting the fans, you had little chance of working your way up to the main event. Disillusioned, Owen had given his notice. Maybe he could be persuaded to return to Stampede Wrestling for one more glorious run before Stu put the business to bed altogether.

That's right. It was time to end this. Since starting up the business again in 1985, he had been losing sickening amounts of money – about $1 million – trying to keep this flagging business alive. Helen was afraid they were going to lose their Calgary mansion, their only remaining asset.

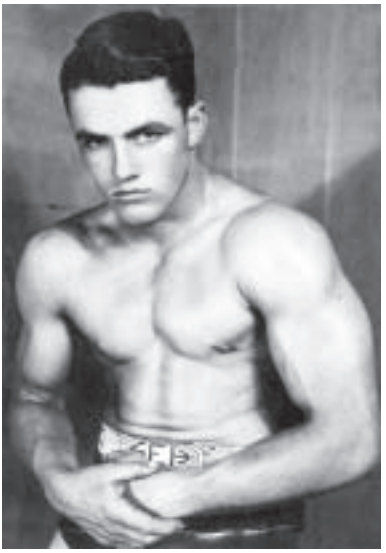
The year before, Helen had been happy that he had sold the business to the WWF, after a lifetime of taking financial risks with this roller coaster wrestling game. But then the deal fell through, and that goddamned Bruce, he just couldn't let it lie. And truth be told, a part of Stu missed the action. Wrestling was in his blood. Helen was his life, his soul; he loved her passionately from the first day he met her. But wrestling was his mistress. He couldn't resist one more fling. Now he wished he had stuck to his guns. His mistress had become nothing but trouble, and she was bringing the family to ruin. Stu wanted out.

His son Bret – who had been a tag team champion with that wild son-in-law Jim Neidhart, wrestling as The Hart Foundation – was getting a huge push in the WWF as a singles star. Owen, he had a bright future ahead of him, too, whether he wanted to wrestle or not. His wedding was only days away, to the headstrong Martha Patterson, who he had been dating since high school. But the fiasco in the Northwest Territories had managed to poison even that. Dynamite Kid, considered one of the family, had been invited to Owen's wedding – until his attack on Bruce. Bruce, who was to be Owen's best man, said he wouldn't appear at the wedding if Dynamite attended. How do you break such news to a time bomb like Dynamite Kid? Especially when you need him to work the next series of matches?

Yet another wrestling-related headache. But there would be no more. Stu Hart started making plans to pull the plug on Stampede Wrestling. And this time he damn well would.

Chapter two

Superman of the Prairies: Young Stu Hart



The Stampede Wrestling story begins, and many believe it should end, with Stewart Edward Hart. Stu. His story is the stuff of legends, cut from the rugged, red-blooded mythology of the Wild West. Define what it means to be tough – in the two-fisted traditions of John Wayne or a 1940s comic book hero – and in Stu Hart you have the realization of that all-but-extinct ideal. A rock-hard, square-jawed man up to any physical challenge; a tireless worker; a pillar of strict moral fibre (even though he made his name in a morally ambiguous world); a virile stud bull who fathered twelve children, many of them chiselled physical specimens in their own right; a man who was never seen to shed a tear, no matter the crushing crises, because men don't cry.

Stu Hart was forged in steel. A superman of the Prairies. But he was no antiquated macho brute. Here too was a man who cooked for his children, mended their clothes, cared for them when they were ill, and got them off to school each and every day. Stu Hart was a gentleman who unashamedly fostered his maternal instincts while his wife handled the business end of the family business, taking care of the finances, the advertising, and the bookkeeping. Not so strange now, perhaps, but very much so in the 1950s.

The Stu Hart saga began on May 3, 1915, when the wrestling legend was born in a small farm on the southern edge of Saskatoon. The Canadian Prairies were North America's final frontier, the last unsettled strip of the Wild West. The Canadian government invited homesteaders, for a $10 title fee, to

A finely chiselled Stu Hart, an amateur wrestling champion in 1936. Stu made this beaded belt himself, one of his many domestic skills.

settle a quarter section of land; as long as they built homes and harvested the land, it was theirs. The idea of building a new life and owning land attracted people from across North America and Europe. They made their way to the Prairies, often with little money or resources.

The homesteaders soon found that the promised land was one of many hardships. The summers were hot and dry, the winters deathly cold. They needed a team of horses and oxen to pull their plows, to break into the hard virgin soil so they could seed each field by hand. Often their wheat was hit by frost, frozen before it was ripe.

Stu's father, Edward – born in 1881 in Bruce County, Ontario, near what is today Peterborough – was a small boy when his father John decided to move the family west. With his wife, born Fannie Sargeant, and eight children, the Harts settled in Brandon, Manitoba, to live with Fannie's parents on the Sargeant farm.

With the West being settled and towns springing up across the Prairies, John, a carpenter, knew there would be an abundance of work. His plans were shattered when he was caught in a blizzard and forced to walk twenty miles to shelter. He died of pneumonia a few weeks later. Without John's income, Fannie struggled to make ends meet. Edward dropped out of school to do his part. He was instilled with the notion that the world was a harsh, bleak place where one had to perpetually work, struggling for the good life.

Raised in a strict Baptist household, Edward came to embrace religion, firmly believing that the most important thing a man could have was his honour and standing with the Lord. Edward learned the butcher's trade, though he also worked as a farmhand and a logger as he restlessly criss-crossed the West making a living. In his mid-twenties, he found himself in Saskatoon, where he met Elizabeth Stewart.

Elizabeth, a teacher, was born in 1878 and raised in Bismarck, North Dakota, where her father Donald Stewart had immigrated from Scotland with his English wife, Elizabeth Curtis. A scrappy, high-minded settler, Donald served as a territorial legislator in Bismarck until he became fed up with politics and moved his family to a farm in the newly established Canadian province of Saskatchewan.

When Elizabeth met Edward, she was impressed by the handsome man's proud, stoic stance and his tireless work ethic. She was also drawn to his stubborn self-righteousness, which reminded her of her father. Later, when Edward's unyielding nature brought hardship on their family, she may have seen things differently, although, in true pioneer spirit, it was always in her character to persevere rather than complain.

Elizabeth and Edward were married in 1907, living on the Stewart farm on the outskirts of Saskatoon, where they started their family. They had two daughters, Sylvester and Edrie, before Stu came into the world. From the moment Stu learned to walk, his father had indoctrinated him into the grind of farm life and the never-ending chores that came with it. Under the no-nonsense Edward, Stu's upbringing was sadly fun-free. When he fashioned a ball out of string and rags, his father confiscated it, telling him that the farm was a place for work, not play.

Edward toiled away over the years as a farmhand and, for a short time, as a firefighter in Saskatoon, but he had to quit the job because he refused to work Sundays. Not content to live with his in-laws, he was always working toward harvesting his own tract of land. He made his move when Stu was in first grade, moving the family to a farm in Forgan, Saskatchewan, near the Alberta border. The clay-hardened land there failed to yield much of a crop, and it was a trial to keep the children and livestock fed.

When Stu was nine years old, his father signed an agreement to take possession of a crop share near Tofield, Alberta, forty miles east of Edmonton. There, as a tenant farmer, he was to give a part of each crop as rent. He was to claim the land on May 1, 1925, but when he returned to Forgan, he fell ill, as did his family and much of the town, stricken with an outbreak of whooping cough and scarlet fever. It took the family nearly two months to recover. When at last they did, the Harts had to transport two horses, a wagon full of their possessions, and about twenty cows fifty miles to the Rosetown, Saskatchewan, train station, camping in ditches along the way. When they finally made the train, Stu rode in the cattle car so that he could sell fresh milk at each stop. The trip took about two weeks. In taped interviews with Calgary's Glenbow Museum, Stu remembered it all as a terrific adventure – until the train stopped in Tofield.

It was July 1. The Harts were a full two months late, establishing what was to become a family trait for tardiness. They had not even herded the livestock off the boxcar when they learned the land had been sold in Edward's absence to James Jobb, owner of the local dry-goods store. Soon Edward and Jobb were embroiled in a heated faceoff. Jobb had already begun to clear the land and he was not about to leave. Edward refused to back down. He bought two nine-by-six foot canvas tents, led his family and livestock to the land, and set up camp by the dirt road outside the farm fence. The parents slept in one tent while Stu shared the other with his sisters, sleeping on mattresses of pine bows stuffed in gunny sacks.

Day after day, Edward appeared in court with his signed contract for the

Top left: Baby Stu Hart, 1915.

Top right: Stu's parents, Edward and Elizabeth Hart.

Bottom: Helen Hart as a baby with her parents, Harry and Ellie Smith, in Long Beach, New York, 1924.

sale of the land, fighting to regain the farm. Jobb launched a countersuit to have the Harts evicted and, as the courts proved painfully slow, the store owner took heart when summer turned to fall and then to the cruel Prairie winter – when temperatures plunge to frightening lows of twenty-five, thirty, even forty degrees below zero Celsius; when winds whip mercilessly at frostbitten skin; when snow falls knee-deep. Surely such conditions would have his hated squatters fleeing for their lives, Jobb thought. But it wasn't to be. Instead, Edward forced the family to dig in.

On the harshest nights, winds blew with such fierceness that they threatened to tear the tents apart. The wind penetrated the canvas, chilling those inside to the bone. Stu had no one to warm himself next to, as did his mother and father and his two sisters, so he huddled up with his dog. The falling snow piled up on the tent tops, threatening to collapse the shelters. Stu often got up in the middle of the night to brush the snow away.

Each evening, Elizabeth stood over an open fire and a wood-burning stove to prepare whatever food the family could find – rabbits, gophers, birds – any animal Stu could take down with his slingshot. His father helped out whenever he could, but often he was in Edmonton, meeting with his lawyer. At bedtime, Elizabeth heated rocks by the fire and put them in gunny sacks to lay at the children's feet. Even so, most mornings Stu woke up with his toes frozen stiff inside his boots. His morning regiment did nothing to warm him up. Before school, he and his sisters had to milk twenty cows. Stu's hands got so cold that he would bury them as deeply as he could into the folds of the cows' udders to keep warm.[1]

It's little wonder Stu and his sisters looked forward to the warmth of the Tofield school five miles away, which they rode to on horseback. But school proved harsh, too. It was no secret that the Harts were poor and living off the land, and Stu's classmates and even his teachers often treated him with disdain. He was also berated because he was left-handed, which was seen as a form of deviance. Forced to work with his right hand, Stu became ambidextrous. "I pitch fastball with this hand and I punch with this one," he would later say.

Remarkably, Stu never painted his family as despairing throughout this time when the world must have seemed so wicked. According to Marsha Erb, who wrote Stu's biography, *Stu Hart: Lord of the Ring*, nobody bickered. If Elizabeth ever rebelled against Edward's obstinacy in placing his vendetta over his family's welfare, Stu was not privy to it. None of them questioned Edward's wisdom. On warmer nights, the family sat around the fire and listened to Edward play his harmonica. They had each other and no one

else. Stu formed two characteristics in these conditions that he would carry throughout his life: he learned to be patient and hardworking, calmly slogging his way through any tragedy no matter how devastating, and he learned to suppress his feelings.[2]

In late 1926, after the family had endured two winters in their tents, the court ruled in Edward's favour. Almost immediately he built a nine-foot-square cabin on the property. But he was soon presented with a bill for back taxes on the land which he could not pay. Jobb, said Stu, was "lying in the grass," and slithered in, picking up the land in the judicial sale. Edward resumed his conflict with Jobb. It was back to the tents for the Harts. Back to the same horrible standoff.

By the end of 1928, the RCMP interceded, arresting Edward and sentencing him to six months in prison for "trespassing on his own land," as Stu saw it. The authorities also came to the school in Tofield and took custody of the children. The humiliation in Stu's voice three-quarters of a century later is clear as he described being led away in front of his classmates. The three children and their mother were put on a train bound for Edmonton, under the care of the Salvation Army.

In Tofield, the RCMP burned what little the family owned: the tents they lived in for more than three years, the log cabin, and their few belongings, including pictures and keepsakes. It was all gone. "They burnt it all right down to the ground," Stu remembered. More than seventy years later, his hurt was unmistakable and profound.

The angry hotel manager cuffed Stu sharply upside his head. The blow stung, but the mean jab at Stu's pride stung more. "When [Stu] was eighty-eight years old, he was still remembering that like it happened yesterday," says his daughter Alison Hart. "He'd say, 'He cuffed me, that son of a bitch. He had no right to cuff me.'" The Salvation Army had placed Stu and his sisters at an Edmonton hotel. On the day they arrived, Stu turned on the bathtub taps to run a bath. Having little experience with modern amenities, he promptly forgot about them. The tub soon overflowed, and water leaked down to the lobby. The hotel manager stormed in to scold the dirty vagabond children he had been forced to house.

Within a few weeks, the Harts were reunited, after Edward's lawyer argued Edward out of jail. The family moved into a tiny house in Edmonton's Bonnie Doon district, southeast of downtown. Most of the city's streets were still unpaved, and when it rained, cars frequently got stuck in the mud. Virginia Lorenz, a young girl who lived across the street from the Harts,

remembers Edward coming out with his horses to help pull the cars out of the muck.

Virginia never liked Edward, though. "Oh, he was a bastard," she says. "Everybody disliked him. I don't know where he practised his religion but he was so bad with it, it was Satanic, almost.... And he was the boss.... You read about it in old English books, about how the old man would treat his family like slaves.... His ego was as big as all get out." Virginia also recalls Edward being "smart as a whip" and a "wheeler-dealer," always trying to talk his way out of paying his rent on the land. He was constantly busy, she says, but never seemed to accomplish much. "He would build something and work on it like crazy. Then the whole thing would fall down when he was finished."

But in Edmonton, Stu found a way to assert his independence from his father. Indeed, his life began in Edmonton, because that's where he became an athlete. In 1929, the provincial capital was in its infancy, its population under seventy-five thousand. Other than work, there wasn't much to do. Like many kids, Stu spent time at the local YMCA participating in the free activities offered. He was most fascinated by wrestling. For weeks, he watched young wrestlers twisting and stretching each other, inflicting pain on the grungy mats. Before long, the boys took notice of him and, always looking for fresh meat to pound, they invited him to try his hand at the world's oldest sport.

Stu stepped onto the mat with one of the grapplers and, after a short back and forth tussle, his opponent had him tied up in one excruciating hold after another. His head was pushed between his knees and down his chest until he could have kissed his belly button, until he thought his neck might break; his elbows were twisted behind his head until he feared his shoulders would pop from their sockets; his legs were pulled apart and he could feel his groin muscles about to tear and burst. He fought to break free, but with his neck so compromised – it felt like it had been stretched several inches – with his face buried in his stomach, he was struggling to breathe. He was beginning to black out. It was the exact routine Stu would one day master and inflict on countless victims, wrestlers and otherwise, one he described in interview after interview with relish.

When his opponent finally let him go, Stu rolled off the mat. He was dizzy, his eyes were bloodshot, and he could barely hold his head up for the throbbing in his neck. It was a torturous experience, the kind that has scared many away from wrestling forever. But Stu was smitten with the art of grappling, instinctively recognizing that this ritual was how you paid your dues, how you toughened up. He was addicted. Wrestling is a science, a chess game

in which two warriors countermove, each hold leading to the other. The art is in turning one's own momentum against him, all in the name of tangling your man up and forcing him down before he could do the same to you. It was poetry.

For Stu, who had been made to feel so degraded growing up, wrestling, if you could master it, was the ultimate form of empowerment. "I was a stretching post for them," he later said of his early experiences, "but I longed for the day when I could tie them into knots. When that day came, I could walk down the street knowing anyone within my eyesight, I could have 'em for lunch."[3]

Stu eagerly returned for more, absorbing unreal doses of punishment. Within a few years, he was able to hold his own with the best of the grapplers. But he was never deterred by the pain. He was drawn to it. He learned from it. Throughout this time, Stu rarely met a sport he could not master. He tackled football, hockey, baseball, soccer, cricket, and lacrosse with gusto, playing on every team he could. But life during the Great Depression couldn't be only about sports – you had to do your share to make ends meet.

Canada's economy had been crippled by the stock market crash of 1929. Those who still had jobs were barely making enough to survive. A report released by the federal Department of Labour in 1933, in the midst of the Depression, suggested that a family needed between $1,200 and $1,500 a year to maintain the "minimum standard of decency." At that time, 60 percent of men and 82 percent of women made less than $1,000 a year. Parents often found it difficult to keep their children in school because they needed them to work. Stu managed to stay in school, but he did his part working as a newspaper carrier. During his school lunch hour, he sold copies of the *Edmonton Journal* at the train station. He made more money selling the *Edmonton Liberator* though, which was published by J.J. Maloney, head of the Ku Klux Klan's Alberta branch.

The paper was full of propaganda directed against Roman Catholics, French Canadians, and the federal government's immigration policy – potent stuff during the bitter Depression, when people were looking for scapegoats. Stu filled his bicycle basket with copies of the newspaper and sold them on the streets on Saturday afternoons. "They sold like hotcakes," he remembered. Stu's schedule was relentless, but he managed to complete high school and then two years of post-secondary education in business.

The young grappler was sixteen when he got his first taste of professional wrestling, attending a match in Edmonton that featured Jack Taylor, the British Empire Wrestling champion who hailed from Regina. "I'm not sure how I got into the matches," Stu told the Glenbow Museum. "I probably sneaked in."

Taylor, who was fighting East Indian wrestler Tiger Daula that night, was Canada's biggest pro wrestling star and Stu marvelled at his skills in the ring, his tremendous strength, and his muscular twenty-inch neck.[4] Professional wrestling had not yet strayed far from its classical roots. There was still great emphasis on submission holds, takedowns, and the kind of mat-bound combat Stu encountered at the YMCA. But there was also a theatrical aspect that thrilled Stu. He loved the heated pre-match banter and the way it electrified the howling, fist-shaking crowd. He was dazzled by the flashier moves – the drop kicks, body slams, and flying mares – executed over the thirty-minute bout. When Taylor had his arm raised in victory, Stu had found a new hero. That day, he considered becoming a pro wrestler. But at the time, he had the more dignified dream of making Canada's Olympic wrestling team.

Stu focused on this goal throughout his early adult life, and he trained relentlessly, living on a strict diet of vitamin E, wheat germ, cod liver oil, raw egg, meat, and peanut butter. He detested smoking and seldom touched alcohol. By the time he was in his early twenties, Stu had taken Virginia's brother, Al Oeming, under his wing, and they worked out together, along with a clique of bodybuilders, in the Oeming's basement.

Virginia remembers her mother being tormented by the sound of the men huffing and puffing and snorting in the basement. "It was worse than a pig pen," she says. "But they had a wrestling mat on the floor and the area was walled off with white sheets. There was a full-length mirror, barbells, and skipping ropes, and these guys would really go to town on their pumpitude. It was a scream.... That area in the basement was considered the inner sanctum. It was taboo for anybody in the family to go down there."

Eventually, Stu became a powerful, lantern-jawed specimen, standing just over five-foot-ten with a fighting weight of 191 pounds. He had the finely sculpted body of a classical Greek statue. Stu was also carving out a smashing career as an amateur wrestler, winning both the city and provincial championships and then a silver medal in the 1937 Dominion Games, wrestling as a middleweight. In 1938, he qualified for the British Empire Games in Melbourne, Australia, but the city of Edmonton lacked the funds to send him. He was able to get to the Canadian National Wrestling Championships in Vancouver in 1939, however, where he emerged as the country's Light Heavyweight champion, which qualified him for the 1940 Olympic Games, scheduled for Helsinki, Finland.

But amateur wrestling did not pay the bills and throughout those early years, Stu worked tirelessly. He worked as a bouncer in Calgary, cut cord

in Yellowknife, and coached wrestling at the University of Alberta. He also put his considerable football skills to work and, in 1938 and 1939, played with the Canadian Football League's Edmonton Eskimos. Even in football, though, wrestling was his ticket. When at first the coach, Bob Fritz, said he couldn't use Stu, the young grappler challenged him to a workout on the mat to prove how powerful he was. It's one of Stu's favourite stories. He stretched Fritz until "he just lay on the mat vomiting," the Hart patriarch told the *Calgary Herald* in 1991. "After that, I played sixty minutes a game."[5] Stu usually played centre, but he is also remembered as a strong blocker and, when playing tackle, was particularly punishing.

During the Second World War, which Canada joined in 1939, Stu worked in aircraft repair as a sheet-metal worker at Edmonton's Northwest Industries. He considered enlisting, but he was determined to realize his Olympic dream. He never would: both the 1940 and 1944 Olympics were cancelled because of the war.

Stu's athletic career was nearly snuffed out, along with his life, on Christmas Eve, 1941. Following a long day at work repairing damaged aircraft shells, Stu was bicycling home down Jasper Avenue. He looked forward to spending a quiet Christmas with his family. They were still going through a tough time following the death of Stu's mother two years earlier. Elizabeth had been suffering from diabetes but she kept it a secret, fearing the medical bills would send the family back to the wilderness they endured in the '20s. When she eventually wound up in the hospital, it was too late to save her. Stu was always tormented by this because, at that point, he was financially stable enough to have helped his mother. Meanwhile, his sister Sylvester moved to British Columbia and cut off ties with the family. Edrie lived with their father, Edward, until Edrie died in the 1950s. Edward lived to be ninety-two, moving from job to job and never really getting on anywhere because of his stubborn ways. He never gave up his farming dream, either. And he never understood what Stu saw in these pointless sports endeavours of his when one could live the life of a farmer, close to nature and close to God.

But Stu respected his father just the same and was looking forward to spending Christmas with the old man when he heard the shrill siren of a fire truck behind him. As he started to pull over on his bicycle, a careless motorist bolted across First Avenue into the path of the truck. The engine swerved to miss the car. Brakes were pressed to the metal and tires screamed as the truck skidded out of control. Stu was hit and flew thirty feet, crashing end over end across the pavement with his bike.

Lying in the street, he heard a woman comment, "So young to die," and

then she fainted, slumping down on top of Stu's shattered body. Stu had broken his elbows and thumbs, and his spine was injured. Only his muscular frame saved him from becoming crippled. His skin was shaved away across much of his body from road burn.[6] Still, he would rise to fight another day.

Stu spent several months recuperating in Edmonton's Royal Alexandra Hospital. It was spring when he had a visit from Al Oeming, who had been drafted into the armed forces. The day Oeming began his training, Stu decided to enlist as well. Stu's athleticism made him a hot commodity in the navy but, curiously, not as a warrior. Instead, he was put to work as an athletic director in charge of the navy's sports teams. It was thought that a thoroughbred like Stu could boost the morale of the soldiers and even the Canadian people, who had already suffered many losses in the war. Before his accident, Stu had captained a popular baseball team of sheet-metal workers in Edmonton called Hart's All-Stars. The All-Stars were reformed as the Canadian navy's baseball team. Its goal was to stop the unstoppable, undefeated U.S. team – an elite group composed in part of former professional ball players. In the fall of 1942, Hart's All-Stars accomplished its mission and beat the Americans.

Hoping to see some action, Stu eventually applied for service on a base in Cornwallis, Nova Scotia. But instead of being sent to the battlefront, he wound up entertaining the troops in wrestling exhibitions. On leave sometime in 1943, he and a friend visited New York City. There, in a café, Stu met the man who would change his life.

Joseph "Toots" Mondt noticed Stu's thick tree-trunk neck and approached, asking him if he was a wrestler. Stu took one look at Mondt's gnarled cauliflower ears and knew he was looking at a seasoned pro. Mondt, it turned out, was the most powerful wrestling promoter in America. In his late fifties when Stu met him, Mondt was, in fact, one of the most influential men in the history of the sport, instrumental in taking professional wrestling from its carnival roots in the early part of the twentieth century to the arenas of the world by the 1920s and '30s. Mondt helped pioneer the concepts that continue to define pro wrestling: larger-than-life characters, predetermined matches, dramatic storylines – all of it sold as the real deal in order to pack the arenas.

In this muscular, good-looking Prairie boy, Mondt saw cash potential. In Mondt, Stu saw opportunity. Their bond was cemented by Stu being from Canada, home of Jack Taylor. Taylor had been promoted in New York by Farmer Burns, who had given Mondt his break in the business, and Toots automatically associated Stu with his respected colleague. Mondt wanted

Stu on a wrestling program within the next week. But Stu had his commitments to the navy. Mondt was persistent. He gave Stu his business card and assured him he would have work for him whenever he called.

Even though the war ended in 1945, the navy, wanting to hang on to its athletic showpiece, did not discharge Stu until 1946. When he eventually landed in New York, Stu hit the ground running. Accounts of his early pro matches rave about the expertly executed headlocks, drop kicks, and body slams which, more often than not, resulted in victories for Hart, the Canadian sensation. In one match, reported in a New York newspaper, Stu emerged the winner of an elimination tournament in which he "crushed" four opponents, including former world champion Texas Babe Sharkey.[7]

Stu adapted quickly to the crude, unsportsmanlike tactics of the pro circuit. The fists, eye gouges, hair pulling – Stu could take it and serve it back with interest. In one memorable bout, held in the Bronx Winter Gardens, Stu bested the despised grappler Abe Stein. When Stu's hand was raised in victory, Abe attacked Hart, nearly causing a riot in the arena as fans charged the ring shouting anti-Semitic slurs at Stein. Stu didn't need the fans' help. In a newspaper picture, Stu has Stein down on the mat, tied up tight. In the background, a police officer restrains one angry patron, who looks ready to lay the boots to Stu's foe.

Stu faced a lot of "old crowbars," as he called them: hardened brawlers, veterans who liked nothing better than to give the younger, better-looking wrestlers a good beating. "We had quite a few of the bodybuilders," Stu told the Glenbow Museum with a chuckle. "They were kind of dandies. They had nice bodies and some of them were in love with their countenance. They were pretty looking men and the old heels liked to scratch them across the face. I'd see them looking at themselves in the mirror, seeing how badly they'd been messed up."

At first, Stu was seen as one of the pretty boys. Tall, dark, and handsome, with a build that could put movie idols to shame, Stu made a big splash with the female fans, who often covered him with kisses as he made his way to the ring. If not for his skills, his opponents would have made hamburger meat out of him, matches predetermined or not. "They were just old destroyers that would grab you in a side headlock and hang on like it was their last breath," Stu said. "They'd drag you down so you couldn't fall smart. You'd look like a bum. Then they'd maul you."[8]

Stu took plenty of cheap shots and was rudely inducted into Cauliflower Alley, as the wrestlers called it. The crusty old brutes would grab his ears and

fold them, squeezing them and trying to rip them off his head. Bubbles of blood formed in the ears, eventually calcifying. The broken cartilage thickened and twisted. Veteran wrestlers wear their cauliflower ears as badges of honour pinned to their skulls, and Stu Hart was no exception. As an old man, he loved to have people touch his mangled ears, which were brittle as bone.

During his year and a half stint in New York, and then through his career as a full-time wrestler, which lasted until the 1960s, Stu earned his place working against the biggest legends in the business, including Frank Sexton, Earl McCready, Killer Kowalski, Verne Gagne, Nature Boy Buddy Rogers, Whipper Billy Watson, Gene Kiniski, Pat O'Connor, and Lou Thesz. He travelled across North America, performing everywhere from rundown theatres to that most coveted of all wrestling venues, Madison Square Garden.

But for whatever reason – possibly because he emphasized the art of genuine, scientific wrestling over performing – Stu never caught on as the champs did. Mondt never gave him the push that would have put him in that top bracket of the business where he could earn the big bucks. Stu's $90 a week wasn't bad, though. Money like that went a long way when you could buy a new Chevrolet for about $800.[9]

Stu's New York studio apartment at 137 Amsterdam Avenue, rented for $12 a month, was big enough that he could share it with fellow wrestlers Sandor Kovacs and James Blears. And with the massive rat that came up the toilet one day and camped by the trash can. Kovacs and Blears reacted like a couple of elephants spooked by a mouse. Stu rattled the garbage bag, fleshed out the rodent, and then pounced on it with both feet. The flattened beast was unceremoniously tossed out the window to the alley below.[10]

Like Stu, Kovacs and Blears would make their mark as wrestling promoters, with Kovacs running a territory in Vancouver and Blears, in Hawaii. During their time off, Stu and his roommates often headed to Coney Island to work on their tans. In the summer of 1946, fellow wrestler Paul Boesch lured his friends to Long Beach, where he worked as a lifeguard, promising to introduce them to Harry J. Smith, a retired Olympic track star. He also mentioned that Smith had five beautiful daughters who often hung out at the beach. The Prairie superman was to meet his Tiger Belle.

Helen Smith had it all. She was petite and as elegant as a china doll, with long, painted-red finger nails. But the gorgeous brunette was much more than a pretty face. She was clever. She carried herself with dignity. She had been high school valedictorian and planned to go to university and become an English teacher. For now, she had a good job working as a secretary for

Top: The future Helen Hart, then Helen Smith, in 1945. Stu always said his lovely wife looked like Rita Hayworth.

Middle: Stu wrestling Eddie King in New York in 1948, preparing to twist the man into a human pretzel.

Bottom: Helen Smith at Long Beach, New York, 1948. Helen is posed with Stu's friends, wrestlers Sandor Kovacs (left) and Lord James Blears (right).

the Long Beach School Board. With that job she had supported her family through hard times. The twenty-two-year-old had the undying respect of her four little sisters. But none looked up to her so much as her youngest sister, the pixyish Diana. "Helen was on a pedestal," Diana says. "Girlie was her nickname. We had a three-bedroom house and she had her own room. My parents had their room and the four of us were in the other one. She was the first born and she was just so smart. Brilliant. She read a lot and she had to have her own room. I was never jealous of her.... I thought the world of her."

Diana fondly remembers the day the Smith girls met Stu Hart. "I remember [Helen] was lying there on the sand and I fixed her hair," says Diana. "She was so pretty. She had beautiful, naturally curly hair...."

When Paul Boesch introduced the three well-built wrestlers to the Smith girls, the jocks made a fine impression. "These gentlemen were so nice," Diana says. "I thought Stu had a British accent. He sounded so refined.... And Stu was smitten, I guess." Stu thought Helen looked like movie star Rita Hayworth, and he was charmed by her classy demeanour. She was nothing like the low-rent ring rats, the wrestling groupies, he was accustomed to.

Later that day, the wrestlers walked the Smith girls home, and Stu met Helen's father, Harry, who had been a member of the 1912 Olympic track team in Stockholm, Sweden. Harry was also a former long-distance and middle-distance state champion, and he had run the Boston Marathon each year for ten years straight. Stu was fascinated by Harry and the two athletes clicked immediately.

Helen wasn't quite as enamoured with the muscular Canadian wrestler. He was handsome and polite, but not her type. Wrestling wasn't for her. She was looking for a man of sophistication and had a number of suitors. She had a passion for dancing and wanted to be swept off her feet by a prince, a man she could samba with.[11]

Nevertheless, Stu and his buddies returned to Long Beach whenever possible that summer. "That was a very happy time," says Diana. "They were always coming to the beach and sending me out for hot dogs. It was fun and festive. They had a portable radio and I don't remember a day of rain. I remember them going in the ocean and, boy, Stu could really swim.... I loved those guys. They were so nice to me, and when you're little, you're so boy crazy. I had it all figured out. There were three guys for my three sisters and, in my mind, it was so perfect."

But it took a while for Stu and Helen to become an item, says Diana. "They never dated that I can remember until [Helen] brought him home to meet my mother. That day I do remember," she giggles. Stu, sporting a golden tan, showed up in a stylish green velvet shirt with a rose tucked

behind his ear. He wanted to impress Ellie Smith. But Helen's mother would never be impressed by a professional wrestler, and a farm boy from Western Canada at that. "She had a problem with every one of her sons-in-law," says Stu's daughter Alison. "She was just a fresh Greek woman." It seems an apt description for Stu's feisty soon-to-be mother-in-law. Ellie was born in the Greek town of Mesologi, moving with her parents to the United States when she was a baby. Diana says her mother was proud of her Greek heritage, "but she wanted to be an American.... She never allowed her five girls to get pierced ears because it was very foreign. Only foreigners had their ears pierced in those days."

To Ellie, who placed a premium on wealth, class, and the finer things in life, America was the land of opportunity. When she married the Olympic athlete of Irish descent she probably felt she was on the right track. Harry Smith was a somebody, a man of impressive social standing. When his athletic career ended, he became a sports columnist for the *New York Tribune*. He then turned to carving out a nice living for himself in real estate. But the Smiths had fallen on hard times after the stock market crash of 1929. Their troubles were compounded a few years later when Harry was the victim of a hit-and-run accident, which put him out of work for a number of years.

Ellie hoped that her first-born daughter would marry a doctor or a lawyer. This Canadian wrestler wouldn't do, and while Helen and Stu were dating, Ellie tried to talk her daughter into ending it. Stu played into Ellie's hands a few times. On their first formal date, he took Helen to one of his matches in which he was slammed and stomped. Upset, Helen fled the arena. Stu caught up to her and explained that he was having fun and she shouldn't worry. Stu was none too smooth when it came to the courtship ritual, but somehow the big Alberta lug began charming the New York princess.

When summer ended, Stu began travelling across North America on wrestling tours, keeping in touch with Helen through letters. The passion in them is undeniable. In one of Stu's, the eternal optimist reveals his soft side, even expressing fear when a letter from Helen arrives late: "I thought I had lost my last friend when I had not heard from you. A letter from you gave me a new lease on life.... [It was] just what I needed to give me that added push.... My courage is renewed again."

A letter from Helen is full of longing, hinting of sexual desire. "The fellow Pat dated the other night called for her here and he wore a Scotch plaid scarf just like yours, and it really gave me an electric shock just to see it," Helen wrote. "It reminded me of you. There are a number of things that remind

me of you, Stu, especially songs. You know music is synonymous with emotions for me and emotions are synonymous with you.... One of the girls is waiting for me to join her and go over to the club. I am tired of the club.... I am lonely, even with all these people around.... I just want to come home to you.... I love you."

When Stu and Helen were finally reunited, it was inevitable they marry. "The wedding was supposed to be on December 26 but we had a huge blizzard and in our little community everything stopped," says Diana. "There was so much snow. We couldn't even get to the church.... So the wedding was delayed until New Year's Eve, 1947. And even then it was a small wedding. People couldn't make it because of the snow." In true Hart fashion, Stu showed up twenty minutes late for the big event.

The plan was to leave New York after the ceremony. Stu was taking his new bride to their new home, a trailer park in Great Falls, Montana. From there he would wrestle and book matches for promoters Larry Tillman and Jerry Meeker, who ran a territory that extended from the U.S. Pacific Northwest to Western Canada. Stu was gradually making his way home to the Prairies.

A trailer park in Montana! Wrestling matches in a frozen wasteland! And where was this Western Canada, anyway? Three thousand miles away. Would they live like Eskimos? Heartbroken and deeply offended, Ellie Smith would always resent Stu for stealing Helen away to such a godforsaken place and introducing her to the ugly world of pro wrestling.

Nevertheless, after they were married, Stu and Helen followed the snowplow out of Long Beach in Stu's blue Dodge. Their honeymoon was less than romantic. First, Helen's grandmother, who didn't speak a word of English, had to be dropped off at her home in the Bronx. That was followed by a whirlwind road trip to Alberta to meet Stu's family, before the next wrestling match in Montana. There was work to be done and no time to waste.

Years later, Helen immortalized the moment in a humorous autobiographical piece she wrote titled *Harts and Cauliflowers*: "Twenty-four years ago we were married in a blizzard. I've been snowed under ever since."

Chapter three

Raising Harts: The Early Years

She may have been a princess, but Helen Hart could be bloody tough when she needed to be. That was never clearer than the evening in 1949 when she shattered every bone in her face on the teak dashboard of Stu's car.

Stu and Helen, who had left their infant son, Smith, with a sitter, were returning to their Great Falls trailer after a wrestling match. The couple was cruising along a quiet road in northern Montana when a car ran a stop sign straight into their path. In her autobiography, *Under the Mat*, Diana Hart, Stu and Helen's youngest daughter, claims the driver of the other vehicle was a woman escaped from a mental institution, making her getaway in a stolen car.[1]

Stu was unharmed save a few scrapes and bruises, but Helen, pregnant with their second child, was nearly killed, slamming headfirst into the dashboard. Stu never forgot his amazement as Helen, numb with shock, took out a notebook and calmly began recording the details of the accident for the insurance claim while they awaited the ambulance.[2]

Her skull was fractured, her teeth were shattered, her jaw was broken, and her nose and cheek bones had to be completely reconstructed. She also wound up in a body cast. But the physical agony was nothing compared with the anguish Helen felt when the doctors told her that her unborn child had little chance of survival. But she wasn't going to give up on her baby. When the doctors tried to give her painkillers to ease the hellish ache that tore across her crushed face, she refused to take them, believing they would hurt the baby's chances.

Stu and Helen on their honeymoon, in 1948, during a stop in Calgary.

Receiving the news in New York, the Smith family, who would care for little Smith for nearly two years, was grief stricken. Helen's sister Diana heard that as her sister's pregnant belly swelled, the doctors had to keep resetting her body cast, making it ever larger. But everybody feared the effort was in vain.

It seemed a miracle then when on January 13, 1950, Helen gave birth to Bruce Hart. From that moment, there was a special bond between the mother and her blue-eyed baby boy whose beautiful blond hair reminded her of her father's. "Bruce was definitely mother's fair-haired one," says Keith, the couple's third son, who was born the following year. "She spoiled him right from the start."

Stu would have liked to have been by his wife's side throughout her ordeal, which included several surgeries for facial reconstruction, but he had to take care of business to pay the medical bills. He had recently begun his own wrestling promotion in Edmonton, and Larry Tillman and Jerry Meeker, who controlled wrestling across most of Western Canada, were less than thrilled. They took advantage of any opportunity to oust Stu. Control over Alberta's pro wrestling scene was in a state of a flux, and other would-be promoters were also sniffing around, eager to take over.

"He had to promote his business or walk away from it," says Keith. "He had it all lined up, and there were all these vultures waiting to scoop it from him.... He had to leave my mom in the hospital for months, and that's when she had Bruce."

Stu had started his Edmonton operation, Klondike Wrestling, in 1948 while working for Tillman and Meeker as a wrestler and booker. When it came to Alberta, Tillman and Meeker had been neglecting the capital city. Stu was contacted by Edmonton's mayor and its police chief, who wanted to get a locally run wrestling promotion started. They convinced Stu that as a homegrown sports hero who had made a name for himself in the Big Apple, he was the man to do it.

With his friend Al Oeming as co-promoter, Stu began running shows out of Edmonton.* While working with Oeming, Stu continued to wrestle from his base in Great Falls.

Klondike Wrestling was a hit, with Stu bringing in such notables as world champion Orville Brown and Saskatchewan grappler Earl McCready, who had wrestled at the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam. Other colour-

*After a short career in wrestling, Oeming went on to be a prominent zoologist, opening up the Alberta Game Farm in 1959.

ful characters in the early days of Klondike Wrestling included Chief Thunderbird, the hated local boys Ray and Bud Osborne, Dave Ruhl; "Logger" Jack MacDonald, Rube and Jim "Riot Call" Wright, and Al "Mr. Murder" Mills from Camrose, Alberta, who teamed up with his ugly brother, Tiny. Tiny, whose stringy, shoulder-length hair was seen as shocking in the 1940s, would rake his sweaty mane over his face like a dirty caveman.

Stu's solo promoting venture was becoming so successful that it was causing a major rift between him and the Great Falls promoters, Tillman and Meeker. They began worrying, rightfully so, that Stu's promotion could establish itself across Alberta. When their Calgary co-promoter, Darby Melnick, beat a man in a brawl behind a restaurant so badly that it looked as if he might be charged with manslaughter, Tillman bought out Melnick's share and moved to Calgary to fortify the Alberta territory, hoping to prevent Stu's expansion.[3]

Tillman tried to muscle and connive his way into Edmonton as a co-promoter for Klondike Wrestling, but Stu would not be bullied. He tried to buy Stu out, but the paltry sum he offered was more of an insult than anything. When Stu wouldn't budge, Tillman countered by refusing to book Hart for any Calgary bouts.

Finally, in May 1951, Tillman was fed up and sold the Calgary territory to Stu for $50,000. It wasn't a bargain, but Stu saw potential in the territory, and he made enough money in Edmonton that he was able to put $10,000 down and pay the rest in instalments over the next six months. "My dad did the honourable thing there, because I think he could've just run [Tillman] out of the city," says Ross Hart.

When Stu bought the Calgary territory, he kept the existing company names for business purposes. On paper, the organization was called the Foothills Athletic Club. The name on billboards was Big Time Wrestling.

Stu's opening night in Calgary was explosive. He brought in French Canadian strongman Paul Baillargeon, who, using a sling, lifted an 1,800-pound horse and carried it up a ladder, to the amazement of the crowd jammed into the Stampede Corral on the Calgary Stampede grounds.

Calgary was exactly what Stu was looking for. A base for his expanding business and a home for his expanding family. By the end of the summer, Stu had acquired a mansion on the outskirts of the city, which would gain fame as "Hart House." That made it official. The Harts were first and foremost Calgarians, forever to be associated with the city. And Big Time, later to be called Stampede Wrestling, would become a central part of Calgary's culture for nearly four decades.

Top: Stu hanging a lickin' on wrestler Karl Gray, Regina, 1951.

Bottom: Stu and Helen with wrestler Ted Christy in Calgary, 1955.

For years, Calgary played second fiddle to the capital city of Edmonton, home not only to the provincial government but also to a university and a large airport. But by the early 1950s, Calgary was coming into its own, taking its place as the business centre of Alberta's oil boom. In doing so, the plucky little ranching town in the foothills stepped up, in its own scrappy way, determined to bark with the big dogs.

Between 1944 and 1964, Calgary's population grew from 97,000 to 295,000. During that time, writes historian Mike Maunder, a distinct identity emerged. It was a Cowtown. A city of oil barons and Stetsons. A land of feisty entrepreneurs. It was home of the Calgary Stampede, which was becoming larger and more famous by the year. But despite its new money, Calgary clung to its image as a down-to-earth city of hard-working cowboys. "The men who emerged in the new Calgary were not timid branch-plant operators but fierce, go-for-broke, rough-and-tumble gamblers," writes Maunder. "The new spirit went directly back to the ranchmen of the frontier."[4] These were folks who liked to see a good fight; folks Stu could sell wrestling to.

In many ways, Stu was in the right place at the right time, thinks Tonia Fanella, an archivist at Calgary's Glenbow Museum, which in 2005 organized a tribute to the Hart patriarch, one of several Albertans honoured in the museum's "Mavericks" display. "Calgary wasn't always as cosmopolitan as it is today," Fanella says. "There was a lingering small town mentality.... This was a young city when Stu started up.... You didn't have the wealth of big-city attractions you do now. Stu came along at the right time and filled a void."

When Big Time Wrestling emerged in the 1950s, there was no Calgary Flames hockey team to rally around. Any sort of nightlife was scarce. Calgary's skiing craze had yet to take off. Kids didn't have video games, computers, and home entertainment systems to fill their time. Wrestling matches became the number one form of entertainment for many a family. In no time, the Friday night fights were a big draw, with Stu and company often selling out the Victoria Pavilion on the Stampede grounds, a two-thousand-capacity venue that looked and smelled like a barn. When he had a really hot ticket on his hands, Stu took the action to the Corral, where he could cram in up to seven thousand fans.

As well as the cast of Klondike crushers, Stu brought in such international wrestling stars as Gorgeous George, Whipper Billy Watson, Yukon Eric, and the vicious Killer Kowalski (who had torn off Yukon Eric's ear in a Montreal match). Stu's promotion became so hot that gradually he began to expand his territory throughout Alberta and Saskatchewan and into British Columbia, Montana, and Washington.

While Stu was off establishing the business, disturbing issues were taking root in his young family – issues that would fester and grow over the years and profoundly affect the promotion. According to Keith, Helen's accident was perhaps the pivotal moment in the family's evolution. The bond between Helen and Bruce, forged when she almost lost her baby, was powerful, and Bruce would eventually benefit from this relationship. From the start, Bruce had both his mother's creative flair and his father's ambition. Jock Osler, who married Helen's sister Diana, remembers his nephew being a serious young man. "I remember having conversations with Bruce when he was just a kid about what he was going to do," says the former *Calgary Herald* journalist and press secretary for Progressive Conservative prime minister Joe Clark. "He wanted to be a very serious sort of person and make his mark in life and what not. He was a very sensitive kid, too, and he lacked confidence."

By the time he was an adult, Bruce's all-consuming ambition was to take over the family business when his father was ready to retire. But his wild, over-the-top ideas would not always find favour with conservative, old-fashioned Stu. They butted heads over direction when it came to violence in the ring, and the development of characters and storylines. Stu also took exception to the ways in which Bruce did business and dealt with the talent.

If there was one person in the world who could change Stu's mind when he had it set, it was Helen. According to Keith, Bruce knew this, and when he wanted his way, particularly where the wrestling business was concerned, he would work on his mother. He could usually sway her. "[He'd] put pressure on my mom, to put pressure on my dad," Keith explains.

The eldest Hart child, Smith, was also affected by Helen's accident. Smith was not yet one year old when he was sent to New York to live with Helen's family. For almost two years, he was showered with love and affection. Gramma Smith, or Gaga as the Hart kids called her, grew particularly attached to her first grandchild, and indulged him. Among Smith's earliest memories is of throwing spaghetti at the walls in Gaga's house. Rather than the cuff to the head he would get if he pulled that stunt around his father, the boy's behaviour earned him nothing but adoring laughs and love in the Smith home.[5] "When we finally got the family back together," Keith says, "Smith was a spoiled little monster who, I think, had a deep-rooted hatred for my dad, who took him from this place where he [could do anything]."

The general consensus on Smith is that he's something of a harmless rascal, out for a good time and an easy ride in life. Most people seem to get a kick out of the big lug, and deep down, his family members say, he has a good, kind heart. He never made his mark in the wrestling business, though

he would dabble on the mat in the 1970s. His presence was most greatly felt behind the scenes of the business, which often led to trouble as he tried to alter the program against his father's wishes.

Smith's irresponsible character later manifested itself in various ways, including fathering four children with four women. His daughter, Satanya Ecstasy Hart, was, according to brother Ross, named in defiance of God. Smith met Satanya's mother, a stunning young woman named Maria Rosado, when he was wrestling in Puerto Rico in the 1970s. Maria and Smith lived in Hart House until the late 1980s, when she and Smith separated. According to Diana Hart, Rosado suffered from schizophrenia; her drug use compounded her problems, and she grew increasingly erratic. One of her favourite tricks was to strip naked and stand on the balcony of the Hart home, waving at passing airplanes.[6] Maria eventually died of pneumonia.

The mother of Smith's son Chad, an HIV-infected woman named Zo Amber Lee Beattie, had a history of prostitution and hard-drug abuse, said Smith in a *Calgary Herald* interview in 1999, the year of Beattie's death. In the *Herald* piece, which reported on Smith's fight for custody of his child, the eldest Hart son was frank about meeting Beattie when he was in his mid-thirties and she was a teenage runaway.[7] A few years later, a tumultuous relationship began and, in the mid-'90s, the couple had a child.

Smith, who lived with his parents until they died, was definitely the black sheep of the family. How could he have been anything but a letdown for stoic, hard-working Stu, who had pulled himself up from abject poverty? It's a joke among many former Stampede wrestlers that Stu's nickname for his oldest son was Shed, short for Shithead. "Smith gave my parents so many hardships," says Ross. "My dad almost disowned him. He let him live at the house, but [after a while,] he wouldn't let him have anything to do with running the shows."

The Oslers defend Smith. "He's an intelligent kid, but he's a little bent," says Jock. "He just has a different way than most people." Diana adds: "Maybe if [Stu and Helen] had encouraged him.... But who had the time?" Keith, though, pulls no punches: "Both of my parents realized they missed the boat with Smith, but instead of putting him out and making him fend for himself, they sheltered him," he says.

Keith, born in 1952, assumed the stereotypical role of the responsible elder sibling when neither of his older brothers fit the bill. He had a successful career working for his father before embarking on a career as a firefighter. Keith would also work as a school teacher, like brothers Bruce and Ross, and in 1993 he ran (unsuccessfully) as a Liberal candidate for the Alberta provincial legislature.

Stu and Helen's romantic, passionate love eventually brought twelve children into the world, with Helen pregnant nearly every year from the time they were married until 1965, and the birth of Owen. Helen used to joke that every time her husband hung his pants on the bedpost, she got pregnant. She once wrote: "We found ourselves producing progeny at an embarrassing rate and couldn't seem to kick the habit, ultimately demonstrating … that it takes only one and one, both insane, to make twelve."

The rest of the brood came to include Wayne, later a Stampede Wrestling referee; Ross, who helped with training and with production of the TV show; and Bret and Owen, who became world famous in the WWF. Another son, Dean, now dead, would have little to do with the business.

The Harts' four striking daughters also became connected to the wrestling business. Ellie (Elizabeth) married wrestler Jim "The Anvil" Neidhart; Alison married wrestler Ben Bassarab; and Georgia married B.J. Annis, who dabbled in wrestling and owned BJ's Gym, where many of the wrestlers trained. The youngest daughter, Diana, married "The British Bulldog" Davey Boy Smith.

In 2001, Diana wrote a scandalous, legal-minefield of a book about the Harts called *Under the Mat*, exposing the family's dirty laundry. It was pulled from the shelves when Owen's widow Martha threatened a libel suit, taking exception to the way she and Owen were portrayed. Both Bret and Bruce also denounced the book as a distorted account. But not all of Diana's book can be written off as mere fiction. Some of what she wrote is corroborated, such as her wild story – much of which is confirmed by the Hart siblings and in Marsha Erb's Stu Hart biography – about her brother Dean, the fifth Hart son, born in 1954.

Perhaps the best looking of the sons, with flowing chestnut locks; seductive eyes; and smooth, Mediterranean features, Dean was fiery. Even though Dean was the smallest of the brothers at only five-foot-eight and 160 pounds, Bret says he looked up to him. "He was always a scrapper," Bret told *WWF Magazine*. "He showed me how important it was to defend yourself and not let others bully you."[8]

Dean used his entrepreneurial flair to start an auto body business in downtown Calgary, where the trendy Eau Claire Market stands today. He also owned a landscaping company. As well, Dean promoted rock concerts at Clearwater Beach, a 160-acre man-made sandbar just west of Calgary on the Elbow River, which Stu bought in 1964. Stu turned Clearwater into a summer destination, renting out camping spots and operating concessions stands on the beach. Dean's Clearwater concerts were horribly mismanaged. At one,

riots on the property cost Stu thousands of dollars.[9] (Stu also got in trouble with the Calgary Board of Health, which deemed the water at Clearwater unsafe. By the mid-1970s, he sold the area, at a huge financial loss.)

Diana describes her brother as being "smooth with older women." He borrowed their cars and persuaded them to lend him money for his business schemes. "He was a con artist in some ways," says Ross.

In 1978, Dean was hit by a bus in downtown Calgary. The accident damaged his kidneys. To deal with the pain, he began smoking marijuana.[10] Shortly after, Dean moved to Hawaii, where he got mixed up with the Samoan mafia. The extent of his involvement with the criminals is unclear. But it is known that, perhaps unwittingly, he wound up transporting for the mob boxes containing weapons. Later, the gangsters, who were facing murder charges, believed Dean was planning to testify against them.[11] In 1981, Dean fled Hawaii and returned to the safety of Calgary, but eventually returned to Hawaii, thinking the situation had blown over. According to Diana Hart, his enemies caught up with him and nearly beat him to death.[12]

Defeated, Dean returned to Calgary, where he tried be a part of Stampede Wrestling behind the scenes. He was bitter having to take a backseat role to his brothers, who had by this time carved positions for themselves in the family business. In 1990, at the age of thirty-six, Dean died of Bright's disease, a kidney dysfunction.

With skeletons like this in the closet, and the very public family feuds of recent years, the Hart clan is often perceived as a white-trash pack of brutes. But that's not entirely fair. For the most part, the Harts are a warm and thoughtful, if eccentric, family. They're intelligent and creative people. Many in the family are civic-minded (a number of them helped Alberta premier Ralph Klein during his 2004 election campaign) and support countless charities. They're a sensitive, passionate bunch, fiercely proud of their family legacy.

But there's a fine line between pride and ego, and sometimes over the years, the Harts have crossed that line. This has affected relations within the family. "Being in the same industry bred a competitive environment in which jealousy and backstabbing ran rampant," writes Martha Hart in her Owen Hart biography, *Broken Harts*. "[That] was a real shame given they had all grown up being taught to stick up for one another."[13]

Pride also affected the family's outlook on the world. "I don't know if it was a false sense of security …" Owen said in the documentary *Wrestling with Shadows*, "[but] we had this [self-] image like, 'We're the Harts and we're invincible.'"[14]

It's fitting then that the invincible family grew up in a veritable fortress. Hart House, the Victorian mansion described by more than one wrestler as an Addams Family home, perched in the hills of southwest Calgary. A million screams were heard from its basement's training facility, known as the Dungeon; the world-famous lair that launched countless wrestling careers. This hub of circus-like activity was the foundation on which Stu built his business and raised his constantly swelling family.

Perhaps it was the ultimate form of personal redemption for those formative years spent in that tent on the cruel Prairies. Could that explain Stu Hart's love for such grandiose, eccentric displays of wealth as Hart House? Or was it just another step in the realization of Stu's ambitious vision? After all, if one was going to carve out an empire in the violent, cartoonish world of pro wrestling, didn't one need an equally over-the-top base of operations? A fortress from which to launch the army of battling bruisers who were going to enthrall the people of Western Canada. That's what Stu needed, and that's what he found in the summer of 1951 when he responded to a classified ad in the *Calgary Herald* stating that the Patterson home was up for sale.

The eight-thousand-square-foot red-brick mansion had a rich history long before the Harts came to it. It was built in 1905 by Edward Henry Crandell, a brick and masonry baron who had come from Ontario in 1899. Crandell raised his family in the sprawling three-storey, twenty-room estate located seven miles from what was then downtown. When his children had grown and left home, he leased the building to the Red Cross to use as an orphanage. One of Crandell's sons eventually returned and raised his own family there. When the brick business collapsed during the Depression, the place was sold to Judge H.S. Patterson. By 1951, Patterson, too, had decided to sell.

That's when Stu Hart arrived. The house on the hill, proudly overlooking the booming oil town, immediately appealed to Stu. He thought it regal. He loved the brick pillars at the entrance to the property and the winding driveway. The three chimneys and brick verandas in both the front and back gave it presence, Stu thought, as did the elegant staircase with its lovely oak railing. There were two master bedrooms, each with a fireplace. The hardwood floors made up for the frozen soil Stu once slept on. And from the moment he saw the dingy concrete basement, he could picture the homemade gym he would have there.

The property included a coach house, joined to the mansion by a small greenhouse covered with vines and climbing roses.[15] Thirty acres of lush grasslands surrounded the mansion. Perfectly manicured flowerbeds filled

the yard. Stu bought the house for $25,000. It never occurred to him that Helen, still recovering from her accident, would not be as excited as he was about it. Typically, her pessimism offset Stu's boundless optimism and, when she was taken to the house several weeks later, she didn't like what she saw. The place reminded her of a seedy, old hotel.[16] It was tacky. A bit creepy, too, looming above the city like a haunted castle.

But Stu was not discouraged. He set out fulfilling his vision for Hart House, making it homey yet opulent in his odd-duck way. The high ceilings were adorned with gold-leaf trim. For $500 each, he purchased six chandeliers that once adorned Edmonton's luxurious Hotel MacDonald, christening each with a woman's name. He laid Persian carpets in the living room and hung fine lace curtains. He bought a long rosewood table for the dining room and a sleek leather sofa for the study to complement the antique glass bookcases. Inside the cases sat a collection of hardcover classic novels and eleven volumes of encyclopedias, most of them "unviolated," Helen joked.

But much of this elegance was to be offset by the veritable ark-load of animals that had the run of the house. Over the years, visiting journalists would give flabbergasted reports of cats curled up in punch bowls, Rottweilers slobbering on the torn antique furniture, the smell of cat urine emanating from the rugs and the pee-stiffened curtains. Then there was Terrible Ted, the wrestling grizzly bear that slept under the porch. Young Bret Hart liked to stand on the porch and let ice cream drip onto his feet so that the bear licked his toes clean from in-between the floorboards.[17] Helen had a run-in with Ted when Stu locked him in the basement without telling her. She had gone downstairs to do laundry, only to find the bear grunting at her in the dark. Frightened out of her wits, she stormed out of the mansion, threatening to leave the madhouse for good.[18]

The Hart children contributed to the home's less than immaculate state. Helen used to say that every room in the mansion was a rumpus room. Even though the family had maids to help out, the Hart matriarch was probably only half kidding when she told a reporter in 1990, "The place hasn't been dusted since 1973."[19]

For a family of such sturdy stock, dinner was always a production. Stu encouraged hearty eating, even when business was poor. He wouldn't tolerate a scrap of food going to waste. Stu was head chef and proud of his industrial-strength kitchen, stocked with stainless steel appliances often culled from defunct Calgary restaurants. Each Sunday evening, the family gathered in the dining room for a lavish feast. This was where the family politics often took shape. It was here the children formed alliances, teasing each

other mercilessly and listening to Stu's many stories. It was a tradition that survived in one form or another until the Harts sold the house in 2004. Stu's strange associates were constantly on hand at the Sunday dinners, invited without anybody thinking twice. In Bret's words, this included "an endless and ever changing assortment of freaks, musclemen, midgets, giants, and tough guys."[20]

Truth be told, über-manly Stu was a regular Mr. Mom. When the newspapers wrote about the family during the 1950s and '60s, Helen played the part of the doyenne, but in her autobiographical writings she admitted her domestic shortcomings. "The familiar mother-of-a-large-brood prototype is a tranquil, generously proportioned woman, complete with comfortable chuckle, capable hands, infinite wisdom, and a propensity for baking oatmeal cookies," she writes. "I hate to let people down, but this is not me.... When it comes to my boiled rutabagas, my unsegregated wash loads and my extemporaneous housework, it may well be said that I have passed this way in vain."[21]

Helen never met a sewing machine she liked, either. Fortunately, Stu turned out to be handy with one. He mended the children's clothes as well as stitching up torn wrestling mats. And the man who made giants beg for mercy in the ring proved to have a tender touch where his Tiger Belle was concerned, giving Helen beauty salon treatments – from manicuring her nails (which were always perfect) to curling her hair – in their bedroom. Stu never thought of it as a chore but as a rare slice of intimate time for him and his wife.

Helen did her part in the office, looking after the business end of the wrestling biz. By the 1970s, the sexual revolution had crept its way into the macho cowboy culture of Calgary and the arrangement was slightly more acceptable than it had been in the previous decades. But even then, Stu seemed embarrassed – though he was no doubt playing it up – when the family was profiled in *The Albertan* for a 1977 article about men helping around the house.

In the cheeky piece, Stu is shown wearing an apron and vacuuming, while Helen sits with a coffee, reading the newspaper. "I ... I ... I'm in something of a compromising position here," Stu told the reporter. "You see, I need a typist, a receptionist to field my calls, a payroll clerk, somebody to handle the bookkeeping and bank deposits and to look after the advertising for my wrestling cards. So I've got this little feminist of mine up in the office and that means I have to go down and do some of the cooking. I make the breakfast and get the kids off to school."[22]

But Helen was much more than just a glorified secretary. She was Stu's equal partner in the business, making financial decisions and co-signing

Top: Stu, Helen, and their brood at the Hart family's Sunday dinner, 1961. The fourth girl on the left making a face at the boy on the far right is Ellie. The little boy is Bret Hart. According to Alison Hart, their rivalry goes back a long time.

Bottom: The Hart children sit on wrestler Ronnie Etchison, who has his head on one crate and his feet on another. He has just been hypnotized by Reveen the Impossiblist, who told him his body was as stiff as a board.

the cheques. Perhaps her greatest role was as the resident diplomat, snake charmer, and, when things got really out of control, lion tamer. "She was on the front lines dealing with the wrestlers," Ross says. "When they phoned to find out where they were booked, she'd take the call, and she developed a rapport with them. A lot of them she never even met, but she was on the phone with them constantly. She would charm them and that made the business easier for my dad, because they loved my mom. So with Archie "The Stomper" Gouldie or Abdullah the Butcher, who could be really temperamental and hard to deal with about money or the development of their characters, she would smooth things over and it would be a nice bridge for them to cross before they had to talk to my dad."

Alison Hart aptly describes her parents' relationship as "tag team parenting and tag team business partners." It was an arrangement frowned upon by Stu's father, Edward. If Helen's mother disapproved of Stu, Stu's father was equally unhappy with his son's choice of wife. "My grandfather wanted my dad to marry a nice, stout farm girl," Alison says. "He wanted a woman to be out there milking the cows. Stu came along with this New York City girl who would never have had anything to do with an outhouse! She wouldn't go near one … and my grandfather thought that was just awful. He thought, 'Stu, you've got to take control! A woman doesn't have a say! You're the man!'… My poor father was caught in the middle of that tug-of-war."

Both Stu and Helen worked around the clock. Stu, in particular, was a workhorse who could function without much sleep. His schedule was unreal, especially in the early days when he was still active in the ring and was regularly on the road with the wrestlers as they did the weekly loop through Alberta and Saskatchewan. After wrestling a full match, he sorted out the gate money, helped take down the ring, and put out any fires that needed extinguishing. Then, instead of hitting the hotel pub or the next town with his colleagues, Stu raced home, arriving on his doorstep in the early hours of the morning to catch an hour or two of sleep, if he was lucky, before it was time to get the children to school.

"He was up before six, farm hours all the way," Keith says. "He always had hot porridge on the table. He'd milk the cows every morning, strain the milk. He fed us the same rolled oats and cracked wheat he fed the cows. He'd get eggs from the chickens." When it was discovered that eldest daughter Ellie was allergic to cow's milk, Stu bought a goat, which he milked every morning.

The frantic pace sometimes got the better of him. Stu was constantly late getting the children to school. That didn't make life easy for the Hart

kids, and their teachers could be hard on them, sometimes going so far as to mock their father's profession. Alison remembers Stu falling asleep during a parent-teacher meeting. "I remember seeing my poor dad crammed into one of those little kid desks. All the other parents were wide awake, and there he was, sleeping away. I understood, though. I remember looking at him and thinking, 'He's tired. He's had a long day. Let him rest.'"

In the early days of Big Time Wrestling, life seemed idyllic to the Hart children. Keith recalls his father coming home from lucrative wrestling tours bearing gifts. "He'd have toys for the boys, chocolates for my mom.... He'd buy a brand new Cadillac every year, and he'd always keep the old ones and let the wrestlers drive them on the tours. He had his suits tailor-made. Raw silk. Shark skin. I remember being about seven and one of the wrestlers, this big Mexican called The Mighty Ursus, would pick us up in my dad's Cadillac. We'd drive around and everybody would be waving. We were true celebrities."

Keith remembers his mother and father being friendly with a rather highbrow crowd in those days. "My mom and dad hobnobbed with people like Peter Lougheed [later premier of Alberta] and all the 'blue-eyed sheiks' [oil tycoons]. They were very suave and sophisticated." But even in those early years, Keith knew there was something that set the Harts apart from other kids, rich or poor. "Growing up with the wrestling business was like growing up with a big four-ring circus in your backyard," he says. "We had bears and we had brutes. Who else had that?"

Jock Osler says it was ingrained in the Hart children from an early age that they were special. "This was Fortress Hart. 'We are the Harts and you're not.' That's what they lived by," he says. Bruce Hart confirmed as much in a 1993 interview with *WWF Magazine*: "Wrestling is the divine right of kings in this family. Others are born with silver spoons in their mouths. We were born with silver turnbuckles in ours."[23]

Chapter four

The Dungeon

While the kitchen, dining room, and office were all important arteries of Hart House, the real guts of the operation was in the grey, dimly lit bowels of the mansion. The heart of Stampede Wrestling beat in the Dungeon, constantly pumping fresh, vital blood into the show even as it rejected that which was unfit.

Nobody seems to remember who gave the name to Stu's basement gymnasium, but anybody who spent any quality time down there came to realize how fitting the brutal title was. And no trip through the Hart House is complete without a long look at Stu's lair. There were two ways to access the Dungeon. The first was at the side of the house, just off the back porch. A narrow set of concrete stairs, slippery with ice in winter, led to the door, which never seemed to be locked, even when nobody was at home. If the Harts weren't such a physical threat, it's certain that somebody would have pulled up in a rig and robbed the place blind. The second access was inside the house, near the kitchen: a steep iron-grate staircase, appropriately intimidating considering what awaited those who made the descent.

The clothes washer and dryer could be found down in the grungy concrete bunker, along with a rumbling furnace room housing an old-style incinerator. A concrete shower stall, the tiles encrusted with years of mildew and grime, came in handy after sweaty workouts. Diana Hart's autobiography contains a vivid description of the young Hart children standing

Archie "The Stomper" Gouldie and Bret Hart slug it out in a bloody chain match, 1983.

naked in an "assembly line," waiting for their brief date with the high-powered showerhead. As told by Diana, the experience sounds like a jailhouse hose-down: "The shower … has so much force it feels like it's ripping your skin off," she writes. "The spray is so forceful and fine it's like sharp quills piercing you."[1]

In later years, an ancient treadmill sat beside the shower, supplied by wrestler and Hart son-in-law Jim Neidhart. Nothing like the sleek treadmills of today, this tank-like machine had a two-foot-wide conveyor belt, the tread made of twine and sandpaper for traction, that ran over rumbling steel rollers. Neidhart used it when he had played football for the Oakland Raiders and had it shipped to the Hart House in the 1980s. The family loved it, especially Stu, who ran on it every day well into his seventies.

But the room that counted the most was the Dungeon. Spread on the floor was an all-too-thinly padded wrestling mat, seventeen by seventeen feet, its borders reinforced with wood planks, steel weights, and a barbell to keep it from sliding. The mat, perhaps once white, over the years had become a putrid yellow-grey, stained with the various bodily fluids it had soaked up, from sweat and blood to snot and vomit. Nobody can remember a time it had been washed.

The wood-panelled walls were frequently in a state of disrepair, cracked and splintered from lumbering muscled bodies and craniums being slammed into them. The ceiling was so low that the taller wrestlers frequently smashed through it with their heads and feet as they learned how to take high falls, body slams, and bumps. Eventually, the metal pipes became exposed, and a few times grapplers broke through those as well.

At the Dungeon entrance, just off the mat, was Stu's gym, equipped with benches, barbells, and dumbbells – up to 600 pounds' worth. The weights, which Stu had custom-designed, had the Hart name engraved in the iron. Over the years, most of these weights would go missing. Back when most people had never laid eyes on a simple Universal weight machine – common in every high school gym today – Stu's gym had a row of homemade weight-and-pulley contraptions, primitive by today's standards but effective when it came to building rock-hard muscles.

Once a week, the Hart patriarch went down to the Dungeon with the talent and any wannabe wrestlers trying to break into the show: play time was on. Stu taught the boys how to wrestle the way he had learned at the Edmonton YMCA. He stretched them – locking them in submission holds and bending and twisting them until they screamed, cried, and vomited, thinking they were going to die. Many simply blacked out.

Bruce Hart launches a knee drop on Tom Stanton from the top turnbuckle, early 1980s.

Up to the 1970s, Stampede Wrestling closed down for six weeks or so each summer. The angles – the twists and turns in the storylines – would build up during the year to an exciting climax at the Calgary Stampede in mid-July. That's when all the feuds came to a head in an explosion of grudge matches. Stu paid top dollar to get the world's biggest wrestlers in his ring, from Whipper Billy Watson and Killer Kowalski in the 1950s to Harley Race and the six-foot-eleven, 500-pound Andre the Giant in the 1970s. He also brought in such boxing heroes as Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, and Rocky Marciano to promote the shows and act as guest referees.

During those six summer weeks, many of the wrestlers moved on to other promotions, forcing Stu to build a new roster. To that end, he began recruiting a new batch of rookies. The group usually consisted of local tough guys, amateur wrestlers, bodybuilders, police officers, and even CFL players looking to make some bucks during the off-season. Often these types showed up with the condescending attitude that wrestling was nothing but a cheap scam, a ticket to easy money. Stu liked nothing better than to teach these punks a painful lesson in respect.

At first, Stu toyed with the new recruit, feeling him out, casually flipping him through holds, each one more painful than the last, until the wannabe grappler was hopelessly tied up on the mat. Then Stu smothered his opponent, pinching the nose and mouth with his huge mitts until the man couldn't breathe. Panic would set in. The legs would begin to kick. Stu gave him a gasp of air, then cut off his breathing again.

Stu's favourite move was known as the college ride. "That's the old pro educating you about respect in the ring," says trusted family friend Greg Everett, who was stretched on many occasions. "He stuck my chin down my chest, which pulls from the base of your tailbone all the way up your back to the tip of your head. You're blacking out at this point, going in and out of consciousness, and at the same time he'd be pulling your legs apart. He'd be ripping your whole groin apart and you could feel the little sinews snapping, like pins pricking. Your left arm would be pulled so far behind your head it felt like your shoulder was going to break.... Yeah, you were in a whole mess of pain."

Most men wound up crawling out of the Dungeon humiliated, whimpering like hobbled dogs. Those who returned won Stu's respect, and he set about teaching them the secrets of the business, moulding them into Stampede wrestlers.

Growing up, the Hart kids got their kicks watching these men strut into the house like proud warriors. They speculated among themselves as to

who would pass the test and who would be reduced to a bawling infant. The young Harts sat in the living room and listened with cruel amusement as the tortured screams rose through the air vents. Little Owen Hart once tape-recorded the sounds, which, as an adult, he later played for WWF wrestlers enthralled by Stu's legend. Alison describes the sounds on the tape: "He's saying to him, almost tenderly, 'Don't cry. You'll be all right.' The guy's crying, screaming, begging for mercy. Stu goes, 'All right, now. I'll take your leg and … this might hurt a bit … C'mon now, have some goddamn dignity. Be a man."

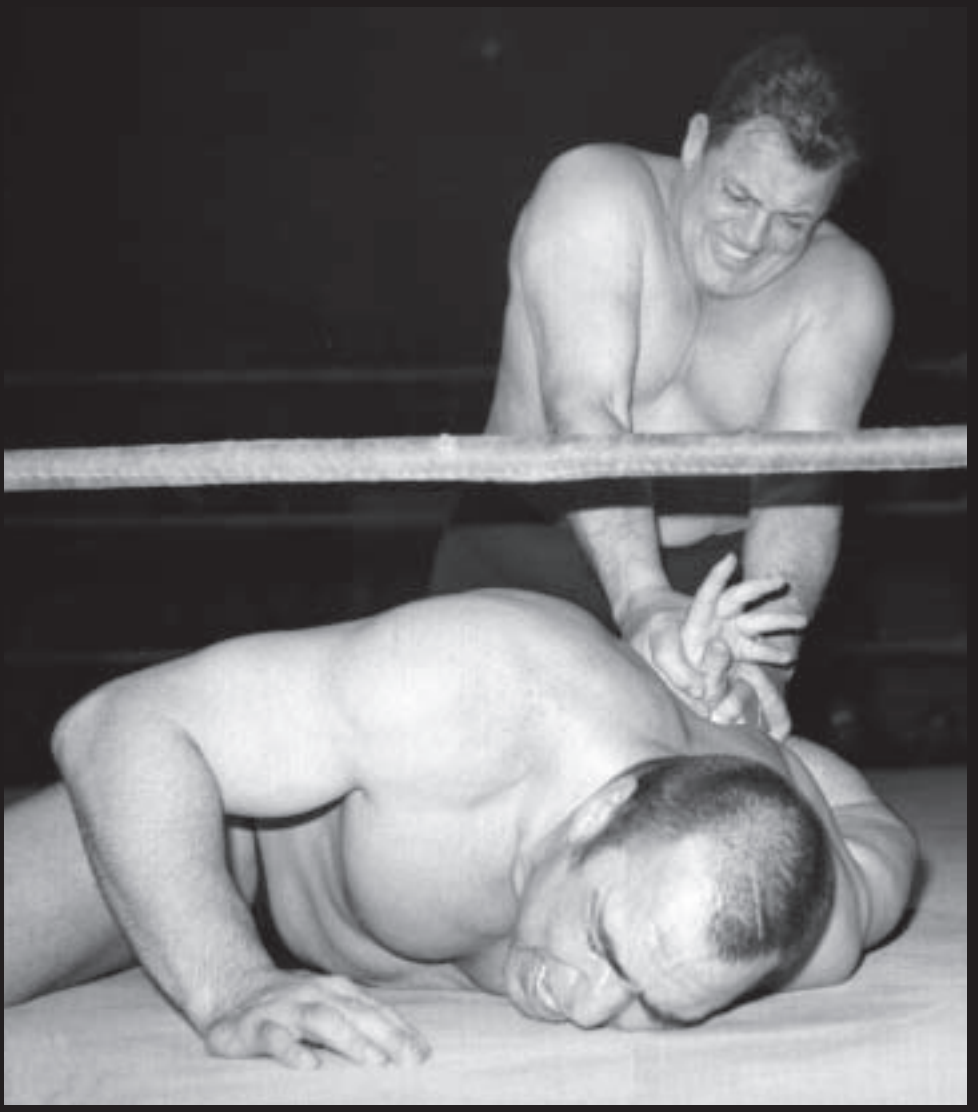
It's no wonder that, as Smith Hart told *WWF Magazine*, "It wasn't at all strange to look out the window of your room and watch some guy in nothing but wrestling trunks, howling and running from the basement in the snow. Or [you'd see] Dad walking one of his students around the property after he had blacked out."[2]

Alison says she viewed these scenes as "Dad getting some exercise.… I had no attachment to the victim. Even when I was dating them." Stu loved luring his daughters' boyfriends into the Dungeon. "When the boys came to the house to pick us up, Dad would look at their arms and necks and ask them if they liked wrestling," Alison recalls. "If the boys said they did, Dad took them down to the Dungeon.… They never asked us out again."

Retired wrestler Bud Osborne trained in the Dungeon during the 1950s. He remembers Stu laying a brutal beating on a man who had insulted him. "There was this cocky little Greek and he had run into Stu in the [grocery store] one day. He kind of poked him in the belly and told him he was getting a little flabby. That was a very stupid thing to do. Stu told him he looked like he could make a million [in the ring] and he invited him down to the Dungeon for a tryout. Stu almost killed him. The guy told me later he saw his whole life flash before his eyes just before he passed out."

Jock Osler remembers when he first became friendly with Stu in the 1950s, while a cub reporter at the *Calgary Herald*. Osler was introduced to the promoter by sports columnist Johnny Hopkins, who used to moonlight for Stu, ghostwriting the wrestling programs. Occasionally, *Herald* reporters accompanied Hopkins to Hart House. After a while, the reporters asked the inevitable question: "Is wrestling fake?" By way of explanation, Stu gave the hapless scraps a friendly invitation to the Dungeon. "He'd indulge them for a while," says Osler, who saw many a stretching – something he wisely avoided. "He'd go along with whatever they wanted to do to him. Then, all of a sudden, he'd tie 'em up in knots and make 'em squeal.… He loved that."

If anybody crossed Stu anywhere near the Dungeon, God help them. Bret Hart recalls the night some fool kid tried to steal a Cadillac from the Harts'



The teacher and pupil, years later. Stu pins Archie "The Stomper" Gouldie to the mat with a vicious hammerlock. Stu often said that Gouldie was the most accomplished professional wrestler he ever trained in the Dungeon, early 1970s.

yard. But the snow on the driveway was too thick and the car got stuck. Before the kid knew it, Stu had snatched him up and hauled him into the Dungeon. Rather than call the cops, the wrestler disciplined the kid himself with a bit of mat-bound torture, then phoned his parents. Stu later learned the kid was from a poor family and gave him a job as an usher at the wrestling matches.[3]

There are countless stories of Stu taking such liberties, right up to his final years. The stories are most often funny, but they are also disturbing. For all his good and noble qualities, Stu had a sadistic side. Stretching wannabe wrestlers was one thing. If that's the way a grappler had to pay his dues, so be it. Wrestling was not for the meek. But when it came to punishing average joes, curious reporters, and teens trying to date his daughters, something was definitely amiss with the Hart patriarch's behaviour.

Many have come to the conclusion that Stu was a bully, abusing his physical power. "I thought it was bullshit," says ex-wrestler Ben Bassarab, who married Alison Hart. "He never once said to a guy, 'Listen, I'm going to take you downstairs and put you in a hold and hurt you. I'm not going to let you go. The more you scream and kick, the more I'm going to put the pressure on you' … that's not teaching. To me, that's bullying."

The late Lou Thesz, believed by many to be the greatest wrestler of all time, was also critical of Stu's methods. According to wrestling journalist David Meltzer, Thesz claimed that "Stu was great at demonstrating holds on willing participants and those without wrestling training, but not in getting the top guys in them."[4]

The Hart boys reject the notion that their dad was a bully. Stu stretched people to make them appreciate wrestling, Bret says. Bruce argues that the cutting-edge wrestlers who emerged from the Dungeon – the Hart boys, Archie "The Stomper" Gouldie, Rick Martel, Brian Pillman, Chris Benoit, Lance Storm, and Chris Jericho to name a few – were all moulded in large part by Stu's methods. They paid their dues by going through the hell of the Dungeon and, in turn, "they gave the business their best."[5]

At one point or another, Stu gave all his eight sons the full Dungeon experience. As a boy, Owen was deathly afraid of his father. In the documentary *Wrestling with Shadows,* Bret talks about going to school with bloodshot eyes because his father had put him in a hold the night before, squeezing him until the blood vessels in his eyes burst.[6] It is difficult to hear such stories and not think Stu abusive. But none of the sons viewed him that way. Getting stretched by their father, says Keith, "was an honour." He recalls his father locking him in holds and putting so much pressure on his nose that it bled. "I know he broke my nose a few times, playing around," Keith says.

"I remember being on the bottom, and the only way I could get out is if I got slippery enough that I could slip out. I deliberately drooled on myself, so I was slippery as an eel. I'd get out for a second. Then he'd catch me by the hair and drag me back in.... He was aware of everything he was doing. I think he thought it was good for me."

Greg Everett, who worked as a referee for a time, describes the Dungeon experience as "medieval torture." "It's a bizarre right of passage, liked an honour badge," says Everett. "I trusted [Stu] 100 percent. But you realized that, at any time during the proceedings ... he could break your neck. He could kill you easily." Indeed, nothing describes the Dungeon experience like the battle-scarred testimonials of the men who did their tours of duty down there.

"Stu was unbelievably vicious," says Archie "The Stomper" Gouldie. "I was about nineteen the first time I went down there [in the early 1960s]. I watched him take these big linemen from the Calgary Stampeders who wanted to wrestle, they'd come down and train, and, Lord have mercy, you learned to respect him. He just believed that if you were going to be a wrestler, this was the way to start. His way or no way."

"Cowboy" Dan Kroffat paints a vivid, terrifying picture of his time in the Dungeon. "I came to train with Stu in the summer of 1969," Kroffat recalls. "He had about twenty of us in the Dungeon. He was breaking guys into the business to see who he could use for the show in September. A week or so before the show started he had whittled us down to two.... Night after night, I saw guys getting annihilated.... These were potent, powerful men. He just ate them up and spit them out. I saw guys screaming for their lives, turning colours I didn't think imaginable. I saw guys have bowel movements. I saw him choke guys out so bad that their eyeballs turned a brilliant red. Some guys ran out of the basement. Some crawled out, crying.... He was like a lion playing with his cubs and suddenly he'd eat one of his own."

Kroffat is one of the few Dungeon graduates who was never stretched, oddly enough. If he had been, he doesn't think he would have returned. "He trained me, taught me falls and stuff. But he never hurt me," Kroffat says. "Maybe he thought I had something. Maybe he thought I had a look he could use." But each time Kroffat returned to the Dungeon, he was convinced his time was coming. "Walking into that basement was terrifying," Kroffat says. "I could see the ghosts of so many who had come before me.... It was like walking into a war zone and knowing you could get killed, but for some reason, you stay.... The fear was driving me out the door but my desire outweighed that decision.... I wanted to be a wrestler so bad."

Chapter five

Pirates on the Prairies

"The whole thing was born, they say, in the late 1940s, when most ex-GIs wanted to get back to an orderly pattern: college, marriage, a job, children – all the peaceful extras that come with a sense of security. But not everybody felt that way.... There were thousands of veterans in 1945 who flatly rejected the idea of going back to their prewar pattern.... They wanted more action...." So wrote Hunter S. Thompson on the rise of American motorcycle gangs in *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*.[1]

When Keith Hart spoke about his father's savage and eccentric gang, the 1950s stars of Big Time Wrestling, his words bring Thompson's to mind. Whether the ticket to freedom was a motorcycle or a wrestling ring, the sentiments were identical. "These old guys came out of the war era and they didn't want to punch a clock," Keith says. "These guys wanted to travel ... work their own hours. They wanted freedom.... Some of the most remarkable people I ever met were wrestlers.... I admired the class guys who were smart, like my father. Then you had guys who got into the business because it was a big ego trip and a slack way of life. You could make some money, sleep till noon, party all night."

Like the bikers, pro wrestlers found a way to live a sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll lifestyle, before rock 'n' roll was even around. Decades later, when the likes of Vince McMahon Jr. and Bruce Hart made the connection between rock and wrestling, they were picking up on the primal elements, the kindred spirit the

Al "Mr. Murder" Mills, late 1940s or early '50s.

two forms share. The colourful, larger-than-life characters. The wild, liberating act of standing nearly naked in a spotlight, howling like a beast, thrashing a guitar, or an opponent, by the neck. The defiance of society's conventions. Most wrestlers were dropouts and thrill-seekers, rebels who had shunned the rat race to run away and join the circus. Living hard on the road, surviving from gig to gig, from skirt to skirt, in truck stops and cheap motels.

The early wrestlers – during the Great Depression and the World Wars – were often poor, lost souls, renegades trying to make their way in the harsh, uncertain world. John Dolin, director of the documentary *Wrestling with the Past*, sees the old school grapplers as Steinbeck figures: "They were like itinerant workers who went from one territory to another. They would harvest their popularity in one area and then they'd move on. They'd put thousands of miles on the road."

That was the case with Phil Klein, who grew up in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta, during the Depression. By the time he was fourteen, Klein was riding the rails in search of work and a better life outside the hard-luck Prairies. At one point, the schoolyard scrapper put his skills to the test in the boxing ring. "I think I made $5 a fight," recalls the eighty-eight year old with an endearingly gruff chuckle. "You'd do anything to make a dollar in them days." After he had his face flattened a couple of times, he decided boxing wasn't for him.

By the mid-1940s, Klein was married to a waitress and living in the basement of her parents' Calgary home, trying to support two children, one of them the future premier of Alberta, Ralph Klein. "I was working in construction, and in the winters you were basically laid off," he says. "But I never drew unemployment insurance a day in my life. I always found an alternate way of making a living."

For a bruiser of his size – Klein weighed about 270 pounds – wrestling was a natural choice. He was introduced to the game by Stu's old wrestling idol, Jack Taylor. After dominating the Canadian wrestling scene during the 1920s, Taylor, who "had a pair of forearms on him like a guy's thighs," according to wrestler Gene Kiniski, had retired.[2] When Klein met Taylor, he was working in Edmonton as a bouncer at an illicit gambling joint.

Through Taylor, Klein fell in with a clique of Alberta wrestlers, including Ray and Bud Osborne, Al and Tiny Mills, and Tiger Joe Tomasso. He began training, learning the ropes, and by the early 1950s he was wrestling for Stu as Phil "Killer" Klein. "I never made it too big, but I never really wanted to," says Klein, whose career lasted about eight years. "It was something to keep the wolf away from the door in the winter."

For a rough 'n' tumble free spirit like Klein, wrestling was a hoot. He remembers being in the ring with Ray Osborne one night when a blow landed for real. "I caught an elbow smash and it broke my nose," says Klein with a barrelling laugh. "I rolled out of the ring [covered in blood] and one of the fans said, 'Ah, it's just ketchup.' I took a handful of blood, wiped it across his face, and said, 'Try that on fer ketchup!'"

Such physical interactions with the fans were commonplace. The spectators would get so worked up at the matches that they frequently attacked the wrestlers. It came with the job. "You had to pick out the instigator and lay one on him good," Klein says. "That generally softened up the rest of 'em." Sometimes the fans got the better of the wrestlers. Klein remembers one grappler getting "knifed in the butt" by an overzealous army private in some B.C. town he's long forgotten. Another time an audience member snatched the ring bell and tried to crack open a wrestler's skull, a blow that cost the grappler a head full of stitches.

Sometimes, though, fan participation was encouraged, especially during the summer rodeo and carnival season, when many wrestlers worked as special attractions, performing feats of strength or challenging local toughs to pin them for prize money. Klein was working as a referee at one such event in Ponoka, Alberta, when a chuckwagon racer stepped into the ring with Tiger Joe Tomasso for a shot at the $100 purse. A short, scrappy Italian from Montreal, who Stu described as "an indestructible little bastard," Tomasso was surprised to find the ranchman almost too much for him. But he managed to pin the cowboy.

"The next night this guy came back and wanted a rematch," says Klein. "Of course, he brought all these cowboys with him. I said, 'Look, Tomasso, let this guy go over 'cause if you win, we're going to have to fight that whole gang.' Tiger took a fall that night! The cowboys were all happy. The guy got his hundred bucks and went home a hero."

Such circus gimmicks permeated the wrestling game in Klein's day. Wrestling with bears and tigers was not that unusual. One wrestler who passed through the Stampede territory from the late 1950s to the mid-'60s was the late Dave "Wildman" McKigney. He travelled from town to town with his famed wrestling bear, the seven-foot, 650-pound Terrible Ted. Those who dared to get in the ring were instructed to stay in tight and roll around with Ted. Keeping one's distance would result in a frustrated swipe of the paw levelled with enough force to break a man's neck. Nobody liked wrestling Ted in the spring, since the bear was bad tempered after hibernation.

McKigney lost control of the bear on a few occasions. Once, Ted fell out of the ring and stumbled, terrified and confused, into the panic-stricken crowd. It took a gang of wrestlers to pull Ted back into the ring, yanking on his chain and strangling the poor bear in the process. That enraged Ted and it took a full ten minutes for McKigney to soothe the growling, spitting beast.* "The fans were reluctant to take their seats again," recalls Stu's daughter, Diana Hart. "Little kids were still whimpering and the adults were all shaking."[3]

The shows with animals sometimes had disastrous consequences. While there are no reports of fans being eaten alive, one wrestler was nearly crushed. Calgary casino owner Frank Sisson, a close friend of Stu's, remembers strongman Paul Baillargeon returning to the West for a repeat performance of his famous horse-hoisting trick, which had been a sensation in 1952. But this time, some wise guy with a BB gun shot at the horse. The horse bucked violently and Baillargeon buckled, his leg muscles popping like balloons as he went down. "It took four or six wrestlers to get the horse off that man," Sisson says.

As for gimmicks, it was a safer bet to bring in midgets, women wrestlers, or a hypnotist such as Reveen the Impossiblist, who was a household name across Canada in the 1960s and '70s. In the early 1960s, Reveen hypnotized a wrestler, telling him that his body would become rigid "like a bar of steel." The man was laid on two chairs, his head on one and his heels on the other. When massive Mexican wrestler Jesse Ortega, known as the Mighty Ursus, came out and stood on the man's stomach, the wrestler didn't even buckle.[4] Another memorable trick came courtesy of Edmonton wrestler Reggie Parks, who once let someone drive a Volkswagen Bug over his "cast-iron stomach" for the entertainment of wrestling fans.[5]

Like Klein, Edmonton's notorious Osborne Brothers, Bud and Ray, who were stars in Stu's territory from the 1950s through to the '70s, found work on the carnival circuit. Hearty lads, the brothers got their start with Stu's Klondike Wrestling in 1950. Bud was twenty, his brother a year older. The brothers met Stu while working out at the Edmonton YMCA as teenagers. Stu noticed Bud when the young man out-bench-pressed him, lifting 480 pounds; Stu could move a mere 400. When Stu started up Klondike Wrestling, he was keen to bring the Osbornes on board as a tag team.

"I was big and kind of ugly," says Bud, who in his day was a bald brute

*McKigney would make headlines in July 1978 when another of his bears, Smokey, killed his girlfriend in their home, after the wrestler forgot to lock the bear's cage.

with a Fu Manchu–style moustache. "My brother was shorter, with dark curly hair. He'd come out and people would whoop and cheer. Then I'd come out right behind him and, Christ, they were threatening to kill me before I done anything.... Ray was a much better wrestler than me, so I raised all the raucous and he settled it down. We made a hell of a team."

Some of the earliest blood baths in the Stampede territory came as a result of Bud's fierceness. Bloodletting was a long-established trick of the wrestling trade, used to generate "heat," or excitement, among the fans. Most often the gore was planned. The wrestlers might have razor blades taped to their fingers or hidden in their boots. Some kept the blade in their mouths. At the right time, when they were in a position where the fans couldn't see what they were doing – buried beneath their opponents or writhing under the ring apron where they had been tossed – the wrestlers ran the blade across their foreheads. This was known as "getting juice." One or two minor cuts were usually all it took before they were bleeding like hogs at a slaughterhouse. They spread the blood across their faces and through their hair until it looked like their skulls had been cracked. Pandemonium ensued.

Not all the bloodletting was planned. In a 1954 match in Calgary, Bud's opponent broke his nose and stuck a thumb in his right eye, permanently impairing his vision by 20 percent. Bud retaliated by chomping off the end of his opponent's nose. "I can still feel my teeth going through," he told the *Edmonton Journal* in 1978. "Everybody wants to progress in the eyes of the promoter. If I figure I can better myself by bashing a guy and busting him open, I'll do it."[6]

Based in Alberta, Ray and Bud wrestled until 1979, when they finally said to hell with it and retired to concentrate on their thriving real estate business. Bud says the toughest man he ever faced was Stu Hart. "In the ring, he was the best. Mean as hell. None was meaner. He respected you if you had talent and fought back, but if he hated you and you had no visible skills, he'd tear you apart. On the mat, I was not his equal. Very few men were." Bud is quick to add that Stu never hurt him. "He knew good and well if he did any of that stuff, I'd take a club to him. Or a gun."

Dave Ruhl and Big Time Wrestling were a perfect fit for one another. A burly, bearded, meat-and-potatoes grappler who was billed as a pig farmer, Ruhl was popular with the legions of farmers, ranch hands, oil-patch workers, and rural folk who flocked to the wrestling matches along the circuit. He had an appeal tailor-made for the territory. His character was so Stampede-centric, in fact, that when he wrestled in other territories, such as the

Top: A gruff Dave Ruhl fixing to tear Sweet Daddy Siki's face apart, late 1960s.

Bottom: The giant on the right is Toronto's Sky Hi Lee, at a Stampede Parade in the late 1950s. To the left is James "Shag" Thomas, who also wrestled at times as King Toby.

Maritimes and Arizona, he had to adopt other identities – the masked Hooded Wasp, for instance.

Of course, the pig farmer identity was a shtick. Ruhl was actually a grain and cattle farmer. Respectable enough. But portraying himself as a pig farmer really got the crowd rooting for Ruhl. Any hard-working joe had to love a man's man who, when he wasn't kicking ass in a wrestling ring, was up to his elbows in pig shit.

Ruhl was born in 1920 in Watts, Alberta, near the town of Hanna, 135 miles northeast of Calgary. His uncle, Ray Steele, who had forged a successful career as a wrestler, encouraged interest in the mat game. By the mid-'40s, Ruhl had broken into the business. At first, he was primarily a jobber, the guy who frequently loses to make the stars look spectacular. "He was the dutiful foot soldier," says Ruhl's son, Glenn. Ruhl worked his way up the card, eventually holding the Canadian Heavyweight and Stampede North American title belts.

Despite his powerful full nelson and technical wrestling skills, Ruhl's primary importance wasn't as a wrestler but as Stu's top booker and second-in-command on the road, jobs he took on in the late '50s. As the business, along with the Hart clan, rapidly expanded, Stu and Helen found that running the operation by themselves was becoming impossible. Stu began recruiting agents to take care of business in his major cities, booking arenas, acquiring licences, and handling publicity for the shows. This group included his old friend Al Oeming in Edmonton, journalist Ned Powers in Saskatoon, and Bob Leonard in Regina. Leonard worked for Stu as a referee and co-promoter, but he made his biggest impact as a photographer. His works captured the action and flavour of the wild western promotion for over three decades. When Oeming stepped down as a co-promoter in 1959, high school principal Mike Bulat took over the job.

But it was Dave Ruhl who was most integral to the action on the mat. In his role as a booker he was in charge of guiding storylines in the ring and developing the characters in Stu's theatre of chaos. His wacky angles leading to the big feuds were fun-filled and entertaining. "There was a French Canadian who they sold as an ex-Nazi," says Glenn Ruhl. "They called him Hans Schmidt. My dad got him to tell the audience that he had this deadly grip that he could use to win any match. But dad coached him to say it in German. So he'd be telling everybody, 'I will use my *schysse grif*!' which in literal translation means 'shit grip.' My dad had a lot of laughs."

It was no mystery why Stu placed faith in Ruhl. They were both Prairie boys born of solid farm stock. Both well versed in the art of wrestling, always

placing a value on that, never allowing it to be lost no matter how popular the gimmicks. Both loved being members of the wrestling brotherhood, being chiefs of that fraternity where only the toughest of the tough were allowed. They were staunch supporters of kayfabe – "kayfabe" being an old carnie code word that meant guarding the secrets of the industry. They would sooner be flogged than reveal things were rigged.

"If somebody was nosing around about something [the wrestlers] didn't want them to know about, [the wrestlers] would sort of give each other a nod or a wink and say 'kayfabe' to let each other know that the person they were talking to wasn't on the inside," says Glenn. "They kept things very tight." In those days, it was believed that if people saw through the facade of wrestling, it would be akin to a magician whose magic was exposed as mere trickery. Guys like Stu and Dave believed it would destroy the wrestling business. Kayfabe was serious stuff. Funnily enough, many people were on to the fact that the matches were predetermined but still loved them.

But Stu and Dave also had enormous differences. Stu was even-keeled, while Dave had a wild side. For him, the boy's club wasn't just about the blue-collar ballet that was the wrestling game. The camaraderie wasn't confined to the ring, the Dungeon, or Sunday dinner. Dave was a good ol' boy, a subscriber to the world of fun 'n' frolic. He liked to see the gang raise some hell. He liked to party. This made him popular among the pirates of the wrestling business.

Ruhl was notorious for his pranks. On one of countless road trips, Ruhl decided to play a rib on one of the rookies. "Boy, it sure is getting windy," he said as he drove the tour van, which was hauling the ring down the highway by a trailer hitch. Ruhl was nervously looking into the rear-view mirror. "That trailer is wobbling around an awful lot. I need about 200 pounds back there to stabilize it." Ruhl turned to the resident rookie and looked him up and down. "You're about two hundred, right? Do you think you can help us out?"

The next thing the poor sap knew, he was riding in the trailer, steadying a ring that didn't need steadying, his teeth chattering as the icy wind pounded his body. Inside the van, the wrestlers howled with glee.

Ruhl's popularity wasn't unanimous. Some saw their boss as a bully. Once in some dressing room dispute he even slapped the Mighty Ursus across the face, according to Ross Hart. But Glenn Ruhl remembers his dad, who died in 1988, as a good man who raised money for charities and children's sports teams. He was also more grounded than most wrestlers, Glenn says, because of his life as a farmer and family man, which he managed to keep separate

from his wrestling. "My dad got married to my mother when he was nineteen and they stayed married for the rest of his life. He always came back to the farm. He knew how to separate the image from reality."

The gonzo cast who drifted in and out of Big Time Wrestling in the 1950s deserve to be immortalized. It is as if the richly drawn characters in a Charles Dickens's novel had been cross-bred with Hunter S. Thompson's Hell's Angels and the tragic circus geeks in the 1932 movie *Freaks*. Given how so many of them expertly milked political, racial, and ethnic stereotypes of the day – tweaking the sensibilities of the western audience – it's no wonder folks found them compelling.

The cast included the evil Commies, Ivan and Karol Kalmikoff. Entering the ring wearing boots to their knees and Cossack hats, ranting about Soviet superiority, this hated duo expertly played its Cold War-era audience. In reality, they were from Detroit and Oklahoma respectively, and not agents of Nikita Khrushchev sent to piss on the pure, God-loving people of Calgary. Either way, they often needed a police escort to get in and out of the venue in one piece.[7]

The legendary Montreal brute Maurice "Mad Dog" Vachon and his brother Paul "The Butcher" were billed as crazed Quebec lumberjacks when they worked for Stu in the late 1950s. Then, there were fightin' Irishmen like Tommy O'Toole, who lived up to the hard-drinking stereotype. He was pulled over by a young Mountie one night after a match. When O'Toole rolled down the window of his car, the smell of booze wafted out and the officer threatened to arrest the ring veteran. O'Toole, with his mean, bashed-up face, stared the Mountie straight in the eyes and told him in his whiskey-burned rasp, "You know, sonny, it'd be a good idea if you got your little yellow-striped ass back in your car and out on that highway before I open this door." The shaken cop took him up on his advice.

Sky Hi Lee, a seven-foot-nine giant from Toronto, resembled a country bumpkin version of Jaws from the James Bond movies. "He was a hell of a heel," says Bob Leonard, "this great big, raw-boned guy who had the look of a corpse that had been left hanging around for a couple of days. He had long, shaggy hair. He was always unshaven. He wasn't all that fancy in the ring, but you remembered him. He was this monster who'd grab guys and start beating on them."

Sky Hi, born Robert Leedy, is remembered as much for his antics outside the ring as in them. Stories abound of him ordering shots of booze in bars and chewing the glasses when he was finished. He also liked to swallow light

bulbs. "Sky did not exactly live clean," Leonard says. "His idea of breakfast in bed was a forty of whiskey. It was sort of like mouthwash and then he could get on with the day." Sky Hi eventually moved to Europe and either wrestled in England, where he wound up crippled, or joined a seedy Paris revue, where he played a brute who descended from a cave to abduct naked women. Either way, all stories about Sky Hi end with him drinking himself to death.

One of the biggest feuds of the era was the tag team matches between a pair of siblings. Dr. Bill Miller, a malicious, six-foot-six Ohio native teamed up with his real brother Dan, and sometimes his fake brother, Crazy Ed (Ed Albers) to torment the beloved tag team George and Sandy Scott from Hamilton, Ontario. When the heroes, adept at drop kicks and aerial moves, were dubbed the Flying Scotts, the Millers taunted them, calling them the Fleeing Scotts. It prompted a savage two-year feud in 1957 and '58. Up to six thousand people, George remembers, were turned away from one match at the Corral, which held only seven thousand.

George Scott, who often helped Stu with booking, went on to make a significant impact on the wrestling world as a booker. During the 1980s, he worked for Vince McMahon Jr. just as McMahon began his takeover of the wrestling world. Scott was instrumental in organizing the first two WrestleManias. He wasn't the only Big Time alumni who would have impact on the wrestling world. In fact, there's too many to list, but the standouts include Gino Marella, a six-foot-five Italian-American somewhere in the neighbourhood of 400 pounds, who showed up in the early 1960s. He became a star in the WWWF, both as a wrestler and a colour commentator, as Gorilla Monsoon.*

In 1953, Stu trained the young Texan Jack Adkisson, who was playing for the Edmonton Eskimos football team. Adkisson was reinvented as the post-war Nazi with the deadly "iron-claw grip," Fritz Von Erich. After a successful run in Stu's territory, Von Erich took his show on the road, becoming a sensation across the United States. By the early 1980s, Von Erich was the head of his own red-hot Texas-based territory, World Class Championship Wrestling, where he made his handsome, muscle-bound sons the stars, just as Stu's sons would be pushed as the stars of Stampede Wrestling.

In the mid-1950s, Big Time was terrorized by Johnny Valentine, one of the most notorious heels in wrestling history. Valentine was obsessed with making his matches look as real as possible, though, by many accounts, he really

*The WWWF, or World Wide Wrestling Federation, changed its name to the WWF, or World Wrestling Federation, when Vince McMahon Jr. took over the business from his father.

was sadistic and cruel. He liked to hurt his opponents and encouraged them to hurt him. His feud with Chet Wallick was so gory that a match in Regina on November 1, 1956, was stopped because of excessive bleeding.

"He had this icy persona," remembers Bob Leonard. "He walked into a ring and glared at people with that blond, blue-eyed iceberg look of his. He was almost unflappable and always so calm. His ring psychology was unbelievable … but sometimes I think that was his real personality."

Valentine is revered in the wrestling industry, but many describe him as twisted. Journalist Ned Powers tells of a match in Saskatoon where Valentine inexplicably leapt out of the ring and sprinted out of the arena, despite below-freezing temperatures. Dripping with sweat and wearing only his boots and trunks, he tore down the block to his hotel, not to reappear for the remainder of the evening. Valentine was also known for his malignant sense of humour. Wrestler Freddie Blassie tells in his autobiography of Valentine taking an asthmatic wrestler's inhaler and filled it with lighter fluid, causing the grappler to violently puke up his guts when he went for a puff at the onset of an attack.[8]

Valentine's career was cut short in 1975 after a plane crash left him paralyzed. He died twenty-six years later at the age of seventy-two. His son, Greg "The Hammer" Valentine, went on to be a star in the WWF.

Like any promoter, Stu Hart liked the men who could make him money, but his personal favourites were those who could hold their own with him in the Dungeon. This elite group included Al "Mr. Murder" Mills, Rube Wright, Luther Lindsay, and George Gordienko. They were the shooters, genuine tough guys who could clean up when, occasionally, a work – a predetermined match – got out of hand and turned into a shoot – a legitimate fight. This was not uncommon. Maybe a punch isn't sufficiently pulled. Tempers flare. Egos get out of hand. Perhaps a champion doesn't want to lose the belt when the storyline demands it. At these times, matches derail, plans go south, and things get seriously ugly.

Most promotions had shooters: wrestlers who would take care of business for real should the situation call for it. If a blowhard with a chip on his shoulder decided to disobey the booker, he would find himself facing a shooter, who might break his leg if he didn't decide right then and there to be a team player.

Al Mills, raised Adolph Mittlestadt in Camrose, Alberta, was one of the most devastating shooters in the business, a top pupil of the great Jack Taylor, who trained him in the 1930s. So rugged and powerful was Mills that Phil Klein was afraid of getting on his bad side when the two of them stepped into

the ring in the '50s. "I was watching myself," says Klein. "I didn't want to hit him too hard. He grabbed me in a headlock and whispered, 'Look, you throw those punches as if you mean 'em!' After that, I hit him hard. He said later, 'If you can't take a punch, you got no business bein' in the ring.'"

Al brought his little brother Henry into the business in 1948 as the brutish Tiny Mills. In the 1950s, the *Toronto Star* dubbed them "the most hated men in all of grappledom."[9]

Rube Wright from Phoenix, Arizona, was another competitor who meant business. According to Glenn Ruhl, "Rube was a guy who would go into the dressing room and say, 'Well, boys, tonight I think I'm going to win.' And nobody questioned him. That included Stu. He was the pièce de résistance."

But, as with many legitimate wrestlers, Rube's style in the ring wasn't flashy enough for the fans. His brother Jim "Riot Call" Wright was a bigger draw; he was the quintessential '50s villain with a nasty, rough-hewn face like Oil Can Harry's from Mighty Mouse cartoons, if Harry had his face walked on with a pair of cleats.

Winnipeg's George Gordienko, whose skills made Stu gush, was wrestling's rare Renaissance man. He debuted in 1946 at age eighteen. By the early '50s, Gordienko's career was stalled by Senator Joseph McCarthy's Communist witch hunt when it was discovered that the grappler had at one time joined the Communist Party of Canada. Blackballed in the United States, Gordienko was lured back to Western Canada to wrestle for Stu Hart. With his wrestling skills, good looks, and powerhouse build, Gordienko was a sensation. In 1976, he retired and went down a most unlikely path, moving to Italy and becoming a painter and poet.

Luther Goodall, or Luther Lindsey as he called himself in the ring, was Stu's best friend. Stu carried a picture of the African-American wrestler from Virginia in his wallet, where it stayed until Stu died. Wrestling gossip suggests that Stu's reverence for Lindsey began when Luther did the impossible and bested Stu in the Dungeon. Lindsey could apparently escape from Stu's best holds and slap them right back on him. He was said to have once locked Stu in such an agonizing submission hold that the King of Pain was, for once, the man screaming. Stu tried to fake Lindsey out, saying he heard the phone ringing and had to take the call. Lindsey told Stu he'd have to call whomever it was back.[10]

Keith Hart was backpacking through Europe in the early 1970s when Lindsey died of a heart attack during a match in the United States. He got the news from his shaken father when he phoned home. "It really hit him," Keith says. "They were like brothers."

Put this gang of crazies together on an endless highway, add buckets of alcohol, and naturally it made for many a loco night out on the Canadian Prairies. Fuel that testosterone with the promise of a stacked sex-fiend with a taste for stud-bull wrestler blood, and there was no telling what might go down.

That was the idea behind the Mabel rib, spearheaded by Dave Ruhl and Al Oeming and notorious in wrestling circles around the world. This elaborate prank was played on a wrestler who was new to the territory and began with the boys swapping stories in front of him about their sexual conquests of Mabel. No ring rat, the mythical Mabel was a classy dame, a married woman whose husband, usually said to be a pilot, was always out of town, not fulfilling her needs. Voluptuous, sexy Mabel was insatiable. She craved large, virile men. That's why she was so hungry for the rock-hard wrestlers. The point was put across as a challenge: only the greatest of lovers could handle this goddess of erotica.

The newcomer begged to be set up and, eventually, one of the grapplers would tell the rookie that Mabel wanted to meet him. Mabel insisted on meeting at a discreet location, a farmhouse in the country. The wrestler was to bring a feast – steaks, seafood, champagne, only the best. Mabel also wanted the wrestler to bring one of his colleagues: she needed another stud for her friend.

Anticipation built throughout the week, Mabel's victim becoming a tightly wound libido bomb ready to explode. Finally, he arrived at the farmhouse to find, sure enough, a beautiful sexpot waiting for him. The other wrestler made an excuse to leave so that his buddy could be alone with Mabel. Just as the rookie was making his move, in burst Mabel's husband, insane with rage, screaming obscenities and waving a gun: he was on to his wife's infidelities. On cue, the wrestler's buddy charged in to help, and the husband fired a round into his chest, blood soaking his shirt. The wannabe lover would flee for his life.

That's when the party ensued. The dead man rose, pulling the rigged ketchup packet from inside his shirt as the other wrestlers emerged from hiding. Mabel and her husband joined the jackals, digging into the feast the victim had left, carousing into the night.

The Mabel made for many memorable moments over the years, always a great laugh for those in on the joke. One rookie was Mabelled as late as the early 1970s. "The RCMP found him covered in cow manure and totally frostbitten [after his dash through the farmer's field]," says Ross Hart. "He had lost one of his shoes and was totally panic stricken."

The most celebrated Mabelling involved a wrestler–circus sideshow

called the Great Antonio. A Yugoslavian immigrant of Siberian descent who came to Canada in 1946, Antonio Barichievich lived in a Montreal scrapyard, sleeping in a broken-down bus. The 450-pounder soon discovered he was strong enough to pull his bus around the scrapyard, and he parlayed this into a career. A beast of a man, with a grizzly beard and greasy black hair that hung to the ground, making him look like Rasputin, Antonio made a name for himself in Montreal in the 1950s, hauling up to four packed buses at a time down city streets. In 1952, he made it into the *Guinness Book of World Records* by pulling a 433-tonne train 19.8 metres. He also famously braided and taped his coarse dreadlocks together, using his hair, bizarrely, as a golf club. Wrestling promoters from around the world sought to bring him into their territories, and Stu was no exception. Antonio arrived in Calgary for the first time in 1959.

According to Paul "The Butcher" Vachon, Dave Ruhl phoned Antonio one day pretending to be Mabel. "I just love your body," Ruhl said in a sultry voice. Antonio, who stunk horribly because he ate raw garlic every day, didn't receive many sexual propositions and went wild. Mabel told him, "I want you to bring Dave Ruhl and Mad Dog Vachon with you. I've got two girlfriends who want to meet them."

"No! No! I go by myself," Antonio said. "I take care of all of you!"

Eventually, Antonio agreed to Mabel's terms and that Saturday night the three wrestlers went to meet the temptress. When the insane husband showed up, he blasted Ruhl and Mad Dog. As he went down clutching his chest, Mad Dog turned to the Yugoslavian madman and cried, "Run, Antonio! Run!" The giant bolted out the door and into the pitch-black night, sprinting across the field, cutting himself on barbed-wire fences along the way. The wrestlers came out and partied hard on the beer and whiskey Antonio had brought with him to woo Mabel. By most accounts, Stu usually kept his distance from such debauchery, but on this particular night he too was in on the gag.

At seven the next morning, Antonio called Paul Vachon in his hotel room, ranting that Ruhl and Mad Dog had been shot and now the killer was out to get him. Vachon accused him of being drunk and hung up. Antonio went to the RCMP, who began an investigation. ("My mom wasn't too happy about that one," recalls Glenn Ruhl. "My dad got charged with public mischief.") The Vachon brothers showed up at the RCMP station and, after convincing the petrified behemoth that it was all a rib and that he wasn't going to be assassinated, got him in the car and back on the road. He would wrestle for Stu off and on until the 1970s.

Despite a career that brought him minor celebrity as an oddity – he appeared on such TV programs as *The Ed Sullivan Show* and Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* – Antonio wound up a penniless eccentric on the streets of Montreal, selling postcards and brochures of his life story until he died of a heart attack in 2003. But in 1959, Antonio was one of Stu's soldiers and there was no time to lick his wounds after his hazing. There was an endless row of towns to hit along the circuit. There was hell to raise, and thousands of fans eager to fork out their hard-earned pay, addicted to the crazy, violent dramas that Stu and the boys cooked up week after week.

These were the pirates of the Prairies and this was their life.

Chapter six

TV, Slick Sammy, and a Jet Plane

The year 1956 brought changes to Big Time Wrestling that would raise the stakes forever. That was the year the Prairie wrestling promotion became more than a travelling circus of folk heroes. That's when it became a television show and its folk heroes became something infinitely more powerful and influential: TV stars.

It was not easy running a wrestling promotion in the Prairies. The endless road trips were brutal at the best of times, with every city and town on the circuit far apart, but in the winter, on those glare-ice highways, it could be downright terrifying. Plus, a wrestler generally couldn't make as much money in a smaller city such as Calgary as he could in the major centres of Toronto, Montreal, and New York. To come to Stu's territory meant one was remote, far from the hot spots. It was hard to get the big name draws in town.

But Stu was connected and respected in the wrestling business, and when he got the stars in Calgary, the action-hungry westerners responded by packing the arenas for weeks on end. Despite the challenges Stu faced, by the mid-1950s, the promotion was firmly entrenched as a Calgary institution.

But by 1956, the playing field had changed. Alberta had been starved for TV. Since its invention in 1929, the boob tube had been behind a cultural revolution, especially once it entered living rooms in the United States, in 1945. With the turn of a dial, every man, woman, and child now had access to world

Stan Stasiak is sent flying through the air by "Canada's Greatest Athlete," as Gene Kiniski referred to himself, late 1960s.

news, sporting events, and frivolous entertainment, available in an instant on the screen, bringing it all to life in a way radio never could.

In the early days of the medium, television signals reached only a hundred miles or so from the transmitter. This meant that southern Ontarians could pick up U.S. programming on their sets, but Albertans were out of luck. A survey taken in 1950 indicated that 61 percent of Ontarians could watch TV. On the Prairies, only 14 percent had experienced the new-fangled luxury.[1] On September 6, 1952, the Canadian Broadcasting Company stepped up to the plate, airing the first Canadian broadcast from its Montreal station. Two days later, Toronto followed suit. Ottawa, Vancouver, and Winnipeg got publicly owned CBC-TV outlets the following year, but Edmonton and Calgary were classified as secondary markets by the federal government and Albertans were deprived. The government did allow, however, for privately owned CBC affiliates to begin broadcasting on the Prairies. This paved the way for the launching of Calgary's CHCT-TV, on October 8, 1954.

Stu was keenly aware of the power of television when he saw what it did for Toronto promoter Frank Tunney. Tunney had begun televising his Maple Leaf Wrestling matches nationally on CBC-TV, and he was making men such as Whipper Billy Watson, Killer Kowalski, and even Edmonton's Gene Kiniski, who Stu helped develop, into household names. As any baby boomer will recall, these wrestlers were among the first major TV stars. As his audience grew via mass TV exposure, Tunney was selling out Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens consistently, and his empire expanded throughout Quebec and Atlantic Canada. Because the CBC broadcasts were being seen in Alberta, Stu began negotiating to get Tunney's stars on his cards.

Having joined the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) in 1951 helped his cause greatly. The NWA was an organization of wrestling promoters from across North America who were dedicated to working together while respecting each other's territorial boundaries. At annual conventions, the promoters drew from their collective talent pool to elect a world heavyweight champion. The champ toured from territory to territory, facing each promotion's top stars and attracting sellout crowds. As a member of the NWA, Stu was able to bring in the champions and trade top talent with other promoters.

Stu could see that the wrestling landscape was changing, becoming increasingly dependent on TV. When he was unable to book Tunney's TV stars for his shows, business slumped. Stu knew he had to get his show on TV, and so he began negotiating with CHCT-TV to get Big Time Wrestling on the local airwaves. By 1956, the deal was struck, and Stu found himself producing two programs. Both were shot live in the studio with a single camera

and made cheaply (the average locally produced program at the time had a budget of about $5 per show).[2] The programs included a fifteen-minute *Meet the Wrestlers* spot, which aired Fridays at dinnertime to drum up excitement for that night's match on the Stampede grounds.

Meet the Wrestlers involved the grapplers cutting promos – in other words, being interviewed to hype their matches. This gave them a chance to bellow, issue threats, and develop their wacky identities for the audience. A guy like Wladek "Killer" Kowalski, from Windsor, Ontario, the son of Polish immigrants, was an instant star. Behind the scenes he was a good-natured if no-nonsense man, a vegetarian who frequently emptied a ten-gallon salad bowl at Hart House while gulping carrot juice by the jug-full. But his on-screen persona was different altogether. Frighteningly intense, he would glare like a maniac into the camera lens, all 300 pounds of him looming toward it, jabbing his finger menacingly at it – and viewers at home. Then there was the bully-faced Gene Kiniski, with his belligerent rants and insufferable boasts that he was "Canada's greatest athlete." Promos like these filled arenas week after week.

The flagship program was *Mat Time*, broadcast Saturdays and Sundays. This was filmed before a studio audience at the CHCT headquarters. The studio held 150 people, but on some weeks up to 1,000 would show up, hoping to get a seat. *Mat Time* included both wrestling matches and the scream 'n' yell shenanigans.

Around this time, Stu also produced a hokey radio spot called *Dear Wrestler*, an absurd forum where the various grapplers answered questions, supposedly sent in by the fans, that were better suited to a *Dear Abbey* column. The wrestlers answered in whatever outrageous fashion was appropriate to their characters. Helen Hart wrote many of these spots. "They'd be questions about anything," says Keith Hart. "Killer Kowalski would answer questions about etiquette. You'd have The Great Antonio on affairs of the heart. My mom got a big laugh writing those."

The real brain behind Stu's early success on TV was Sam Menacker. A superb ideas man and a first-rate hustler, Menacker was sharp and witty. He understood the wrestling business inside and out. He knew how to get the best from the wrestlers and how to work the fans, the marks. "Mark" was another old carnie term adopted by the wrestlers. It meant a sucker. Carnivals made their money off marks, or suckers, and so did the wrestlers, who sold an illusion to the fans. To Sam Menacker, the whole world was his mark.

A stout man, with dark, slicked-back hair and horn-rimmed glasses, Menacker hailed from New York City. He had been a wrestler himself before the

Gene Kiniski rampaged through Stampede territory once or twice a year during his days as the NWA World Heavyweight champion. Referee Bob Franks checks Kiniski before a match, mid-1960s.

Second World War; after the war, he returned to the business as a promoter and booker. Menacker was a fast, charismatic talker, and when TV became an important component of the wrestling business, he quickly found his voice as an announcer. He made a name for himself in Detroit, where he played the crusading TV commentator, morally outraged by the wicked antics of the perpetually cheating heels. Menacker was one of the first announcers to develop such a voice, and to this day it's an important element of pro wrestling broadcasts.

Stu had met Menacker in his New York days and had followed his exploits ever since. When he planned to get Big Time Wrestling on TV, Stu couldn't think of a better man to work with in the new medium. Stu's instincts were dead-on. "Sam was like a maestro conducting," says Keith Hart. "He was electric and he had everybody up. He made my dad more money than any other booker."

On TV, Menacker became the voice of Big Time Wrestling, resuming his Detroit shtick as the righteous commentator. Behind the scenes, he devised the format of the TV shows and developed angles that drove the fans wild. One such angle involved Czaya Nandor, who had been a freedom fighter during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, when the country fought to break free of Communist control. When the uprising was crushed, Hungarians fled their homeland en masse. About thirty-seven thousand were admitted to Canada. Calgary, with its large Hungarian population, guaranteed Nandor a passionate following.

When Nandor got his Canadian citizenship papers, it was spun into a black comedy. The Hungarian community held a ceremony at a *Mat Time* taping to honour its hero. Nandor was presented with his papers and a white cream cake that an elderly Hungarian woman had baked for him. Suddenly Killer Kowalski came bolting into the studio, firing insults at Nandor. The Polish-Canadian villain attacked the Hungarian, smashing the cake into his face. Keith Hart will never forget the sight of the hero wiping cake from his face and crying on television, his fans sobbing along with him, devastated by this cruel turn of events. "It was the most heinous thing ever," Keith says, "and it must have sold out a million matches. Week after week the Corral was packed." It was a work of art.

Now that big time was on tv, the top wrestling stars in the world started hitting Calgary on a regular basis. These included Lou Thesz, thought by many to be the greatest wrestler of all time; the arrogant pretty boy, "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers; and the Flying Frenchman, Edouard Carpentier, whose acro-

batic moves dazzled fans. Toronto hero Whipper Billy Watson was another regular. Watson, the epitome of fair play and a man devoted to charity work, particularly for handicapped children, was worshipped in Canada.

Gorgeous George Wagner, billed as "the toast of the coast" and "the human orchid," was nearing the end of his career – and his life – at this point. On Christmas Eve, 1963, he died of a heart attack in his Hollywood apartment, having spent his final days destitute and battling alcoholism. But his Calgary appearances were spectacular.

Introduced by Menacker, the Gorgeous One fluttered his way to the ring, enraging the homophobic crowds, which hated the mere sight of his flowing robes and bleach-blond locks. George tossed rose pedals and golden hairpins – Georgie pins, he called them – at the rubes, and before he entered the ring, his beautiful female valet would spray it with sanitizer. George didn't want to catch any germs from the filthy wrestlers.

Of all the screaming mad heels to make a splash on *Mat Time*, Gene Kiniski may be the greatest. His ring persona was egotistical and cantankerous, "about as diplomatic as a punch in the face," as wrestling photographer Bob Leonard puts it. Kiniski's relationship with Stu outside the ring ran hot and cold over the years. Stu usually spoke highly of Gene, and the two of them did some co-promoting together in the early 1980s, but there was definitely friction between the two. In recent interviews, Kiniski has responded angrily to the suggestion that Stu trained him.[3]

Stu met Kiniski at the Edmonton YMCA when he was an amateur champion and Kiniski was just a teen. Kiniski asked Stu for his tutelage and Stu obliged. Eventually, Kiniski got into amateur wrestling and excelled, winning championships in both Alberta and at the University of Arizona. While in Arizona, Kiniski trained with professional wrestlers Dory Funk Sr. and Tony Morelli, and he credits them as his trainers. It was in Arizona that Kiniski wrestled his first professional match. But before he pursued wrestling seriously, Kiniski played football for the Edmonton Eskimos. In a 1952 game, he tore the cartilage in his knee. After going through a year of therapy for his injury, Kiniski launched his wrestling career full time, working for Stu.

Though Stu would later say he viewed Kiniski as a hot prospect, Phil Klein tells a different story, one that might account in part for Gene's animosity. He says Kiniski was working as a referee one night in Edmonton when Whipper Billy Watson was wrestling for Stu. "[Watson] said, 'Stu, what are you going to do with that kid?' Stu goes, 'Ehh, he's got a bad knee. He'll never make it as a wrestler.'" Watson asked Stu if he could use Kiniski and ended up taking the rookie to Toronto. Within a year, on the strength of his brutal, plowing style

and big mouth that wouldn't quit, Gene was one of the top heels in North America. Kiniski would go on to be a world heavyweight champion, and his wrestling career would last forty years. "The Whip could see the potential in Gene," says Klein. "[Stu] never gave Kiniski a chance."

Despite his loud, bullish demeanour, Kiniski is a smart man and that has been a key to his phenomenal success. He always knew just how to offend the audience wherever he wrestled, to the point where crowds screamed for his blood. In a 1967 interview with the *Calgary Herald*, he belittled the beloved Calgary Stampede.[4] To Cowtown crowds, this alone was a hanging offence. Kiniski also had a way of putting people off with his relentless bragging. He used to begin his interviews with the line: "Hello out there in TV land. I'd like to welcome you as Canada's greatest athlete."

It wasn't a persona that Kiniski turned off when the lights went down, either. Sid McCoy, a former Saskatoon cab driver, remembers picking up Whipper Billy Watson one winter night at the wrestler's hotel and driving him to the airport. Watson left him a $3 tip. Later that day, McCoy picked up Kiniski, also headed for the airport. The driver mentioned that he had just dropped off Watson. Kiniski went into one of his trademark tirades and then growled, "How much of a tip did he leave you?" The driver lied and said that Watson had given him five bucks. Determined to outdo his enemy, Kiniski slapped a $10 bill into McCoy's hand before storming off.

Once Kiniski took off in Toronto, Stu had to pay top dollar to get him to wrestle in Alberta. He did, though, and "Big Thunder," as Gene called himself, would be in and out of Calgary for the next three decades, always a hot ticket, particularly during his epic battles with Watson, which Stu felt was one of the greatest feuds ever. "It was classic good against bad," Stu told the *Calgary Herald*. "While Kiniski was a noisy spokesman for the sport, Watson's delivery was calm and reasoned. They made a beautiful pair and promoters may never see that opportunity again."[5]

One can see why Stu felt that way. One night in Edmonton when Whipper and Kiniski were squaring off, twenty thousand fans were turned away at the gate after the arena sold out. A 1957 match between the two at the Corral grossed $25,000, one of the greatest paydays of the Big Time era.

Having joined the TV revolution, Big Time Wrestling was soon reaping the benefits of this new maximum exposure. Things were going so well financially that Menacker, a licensed pilot, was able to talk Stu into purchasing a plane for the promotion. Stu bought a Comanche 250 for $25,000.[6] It made good business sense. The expanding territory covered thousands of miles.

Stu was putting on shows as far away as Alaska. A plane would save valuable time. Stu could take care of business in person on the road and still have time to raise his family. It would also be good for morale, sparing the wrestlers the gruelling road trips. It was a lot easier to entice the likes of Watson, Kowalski, and Kiniski when they could jet from city to city like the stars they were.

According to George Scott, this made for a few scary moments. "Sam Menacker was a hell of a pilot, but he almost killed us a few times," he says. In one instance, Scott was airborne with Menacker, Stu, and Kiniski, flying home from a match in Montana. The plane ran into a blinding snowstorm and Menacker began to panic. "We're supposed to be over Calgary! We should be there by now!" he said in an increasingly shaky voice. "If it wasn't for Kiniski, I think we would've crashed," says Scott. The mouth that roared maintained a level head and talked Menacker through the crisis. "That's it, Sam," Kiniski said, "just take it down a little bit lower."

Close calls aside, business was so good in those first few TV years that Menacker strutted around Hart House boasting about the fantastic money they were going to draw from the big shows. He had a knack for predicting the gate to within a few dollars, writing his prophecies on the bathroom mirror with his wife's lipstick so Stu and Helen would find them later that evening.[7]

But all good things must come to an end. By the late 1950s and early '60s, a series of incidents conspired against Big Time. For one, Menacker jumped ship without notice in 1958. Letters to Stu and Helen from that time, while friendly, indicate he felt he was due a bigger piece of the pie for his innovative ideas. He was also dissatisfied with the production values at CHCT-TV and he threatened to sue the company, claiming he was owed royalties for his TV concepts. Furthermore, his wife, the world woman's champion June Byers, was injured in a Medicine Hat match when a fan threw a bottle, striking her in the eye. Menacker told Stu she might need an operation, citing this as another excuse for his not being able to work for Big Time. Menacker was the lynchpin of the TV production, and his leaving was greatly felt.

Meanwhile, the Calgary Boxing and Wrestling Commission, which would haunt Stu throughout his career, had been increasingly cracking down on the promotion, protesting against the violence and the wrestlers' unruly behaviour. It began issuing fines, such as the $50 levy handed to Riot Call Wright, who pummelled Stu while the promoter supposedly lay unconscious on the ring floor. Stu might have protested, telling the commission that it was a work, a planned happening, and that he wasn't really in jeopardy,

but such admissions were taboo in those days. If news of that sort got out, the wrestlers believed it would kill their business.

One of the commissioners, Pat Sullivan, lived across the street from the CHCT-TV studio. Sullivan kicked up a fuss about the number of cars parked on his street every Saturday afternoon when fans flocked to the studio for the tapings. Sullivan took a petition signed by himself and other irate neighbours to City Hall, causing friction with CHCT.

In 1960, Iron Mike DiBiase, an American heel who was the stepfather of future WWF star Ted "Million Dollar Man" DiBiase, was on live TV when he loudly proclaimed: "If brains were dynamite, the people of Calgary wouldn't be able to blow their nose!"[8] The thought of it is laughable today when risqué and tasteless TV is the norm, but back then the statement was scandalous. The station was flooded with phone calls from outraged viewers and it pulled Stu's TV spots.

"We started to [operate] without television again and it was disastrous," says Ross Hart. "Without the TV coverage, there was no exposure, no interest, and that spread to all the other cities. Without TV, the promotion was doomed." It became more and more difficult for Stu to book the superstars, and the arenas were impossible to fill up without the TV hype and the big names. At certain points, Stu was losing up to $5,000 a week.[9]

Fortunately, there proved to be a quick fix. A second TV station, CFCN-TV, had started up in Calgary, and it was keen to have a wrestling program. CFCN's studio was built atop Broadcast Hill, just up the narrow dirt road from Hart House. When CFCN launched the one-hour weekly program *Big Time Wrestling*, it gave Stu's business a new lease on life. Slick Sammy came back to the fold for a time, promising Stu the world. In a letter he wrote in July 1961 and signed "Sad Sam Menacker," Sam promised Stu that within one year he would have a nationally televised wrestling show and the strongest territory in North America: "You will be banking thousands of dollars each week, with Sam Menacker following you to the bank, hoping you'll drop some of the filthy lucre his way." He even jokingly promised that Stu would have his own Rolls-Royce, with Sam as his chauffeur. Menacker closed off with the boast, "Have no fear, Sam is here!"

For a time, he made good on his promises. Media from this era suggest that *Big Time Wrestling* was a hit. A TV *Guide* article published in March 1963 says the show was syndicated in major Canadian cities, including Windsor, Ottawa, Montreal, and Halifax. It was also seen across the border, in Detroit and San Francisco. According to the article, Stu even received fan mail from New Yorkers who were able to pick up Montreal stations. A retired New York

police officer was said to have forwarded Stu a pair of handcuffs to help him detain the bad guys who were always interfering in other wrestlers' matches on behalf of their rotten brethren.[10]

But *Big Time*'s CFCN years were plagued with problems. Sometime in 1962, Menacker was beaten up by Hamilton wrestler Mike Sharpe on live TV. "Sam was interviewing him and Mike hauled off and punched him right in the nose," recalls Ross Hart. After Menacker was hurt and humiliated by Sharpe, there was no appeasing him. He left town in the company airplane, claiming in a letter that it was half his and that Stu owed him money for travel expenses. Stu hired a lawyer to get the plane back, but the aircraft was registered in Menacker's name. There was nothing Stu could do.

Stu's brother-in-law Jock Osler sums up the Menacker experience. "They brought him in when the business wasn't doing very well and he was going to be the great saviour, the great rainmaker. He was going to be the salvation of everything.... He was an imaginative promoter and he did bring in some good guys.... But I think he took Stu for a lot of money."

Menacker's replacement was Ernie Roth, a former Ohio radio announcer. Small at about five-foot-seven and 130 pounds, Roth too was charismatic on TV, with a creative flair for the wrestling business that would eventually make him one of the biggest stars in the industry.

In the late 1960s, the Jewish Roth found fame in Detroit, assuming the identity of the weasel-like Arab Abdullah Farouk, manager of a bloodthirsty savage known as The Sheik. In the '70s, he began working for Vince McMahon Sr. in the WWWF, where he terrorized Madison Square Garden in loud polyester suits, a turban, and funky sunglasses, calling himself the Grand Wizard of Wrestling. As the despicable Grand Wizard, Roth managed Superstar Billy Graham, one of the biggest wrestling stars of that era.

But Roth, who died of a heart attack in 1983, never got the chance to develop his money-making ideas in Calgary. Roth had a secret which, if exposed, would have been scandalous. "He was a homosexual," says Ross Hart. "Back then, the two worst things you could be accused of being were a homosexual and a communist." Roth was careful to be discreet, but it was known among the wrestlers that he lived with a male hairdresser, a situation that was often treated as a joke behind Roth's back. Even Stu had fun with it. "Stu kind of laughed at [Roth]," says Osler. "There was a lot of wink-wink, nudge-nudge. Stu would say, 'He kind of minces his step.' But if there was a guy who seemed to be a homosexual who was flouncing around camping everything up, if that was good for business, it was fine with Stu. That's show biz."

Roth's brief tenure in Calgary ended soon after CFCN executives voiced concerns about his lifestyle. According to Ross Hart, the station managers were tipped off by a bitter Sam Menacker, who didn't like the idea that he could be replaced. Ross says Menacker launched a smear campaign against the new announcer, painting him to be a dangerous pervert. In the early 1960s, even in the most liberal centres – which Calgary certainly was not – homosexuality was something to be feared and despised. Roth was hurt by the untrue accusations and left the territory forever.

After Roth left, Stu took on popular sportscaster Henry Viney as his regular announcer. Viney, then head of the sports department for CFCN, was a pillar of the Calgary community. He had been one of the first announcers for Big Time Wrestling in the days before TV, and even after Menacker came along, Viney was the announcer for the Friday night matches at the Pavilion.

By all accounts, Viney was a character in his own right. On a few occasions, "the little man with the big cigar," as Stu used to refer to him, got carried away and tried to take out a few of the more villainous wrestlers himself. "Stu had to get in there and stop him," remembers casino owner Frank Sisson. "He'd say, 'Jesus, Hank, you're gonna get killed!'" But despite Viney's charisma and whatever success the TV show was having, the business was suffering considerably. Without his plane and the help he got both promotionally and creatively from Menacker and Roth, Stu was again struggling to fill the arenas.

To combat the problem, he made an arrangement with the new Vancouver-based promotion, All Star Wrestling. Vancouver being much bigger than Calgary, All Star had easier access to the biggest wrestling stars. Stu began co-promoting with All Star, sometimes running its show in his TV slot in exchange for the All Star wrestlers, who the promotion regularly sent to Calgary. Among them was Kiniski, the "Mormon Giant" Don Leo Jonathon, and the Fabulous Kangaroos, a popular team from Australia that entered the ring to the song "Waltzing Matilda" while throwing tiny boomerangs into the audience.

"Their show was terrible," says Ross. "[All Star promoter] Rod Fenton was a cheesy commentator and not that charismatic. My dad's announcers prior to that were really well received. They always spoke to the locals. Now we were getting this generic show out of Vancouver and people didn't relate to it.... This was even more of a disaster for my dad because he was flying in all these big names from Vancouver and paying their airfares and hotel bills, but business was plummeting. After about nine months, dad had to dis-

solve his relationship with Vancouver." CFCN continued to broadcast *All Star Wrestling*, but now Stu had no affiliation with it. Once again, he was left without a TV show.

By the fall of 1964, the business had hit rock bottom. Normally at that time of year, Stu and company were kicking off the wrestling season, trying to ensure it was booked to the hilt with matches all along the territory. But this was not to be in '64. "Stu had to stop promoting completely," says Ross. "He went out of business. He tried to get refinanced and had been turned down by several banks.... [Stu and Helen's] finances were very tight and they had eleven kids to support. My mom was expecting Owen then, too. The promotion was not going to survive unless Stu was able to get another TV contract.... Times were very tough."

Where once he bought a new Cadillac every year, by the early 1960s, Stu could barely afford to keep the old ones in operation, beaten up as they were from so many thousands of miles on the road. The Hart's backyard and the grassy fields surrounding the estate became a junkyard of run-down Caddies, most of them merely rusted-out shells.

When the coffers were overflowing, Stu began upgrading the house's front windows. After the financial problems set in, the work could not be completed, and for two or three winters in a row, the paneless windows were covered only with cardboard. Keeping clothes on the kids' backs was also a challenge. One winter, Stu had gone to a liquidating clothing store and bought red, down-filled hunting jackets for his kids, all in one size. For the older children, it wasn't the best fashion statement to be making. For the younger kids, the jackets fit them like tents.[11] The Harts were teased by their classmates about their "welfare rags." "Hart farts" was another familiar taunt. They often fought back, and protected each other fiercely on the school ground. There were plenty of schoolyard scraps, with the older brothers constantly defending their younger siblings.

Being one of the eldest Hart children, Keith was mature enough to understand how well off the family had been in the heyday of Big Time Wrestling. He felt the loss all the more as the Harts went from rags to riches in a few short years. When times were good, Stu had landscapers level the backyard to make room for a swimming pool. The greenhouse was torn down. The lush grass and the beautiful flower beds were ripped up. Stu planned to plant anew once the pool had been installed. "I was sad because I used to like the old yard," says Keith. "[Dad] took out all the old trees where we used to play hide and seek. He took away all the flowerbeds where we used to play with our little dinky trucks. One day [the tractors] came and uprooted those trees

to put the pipes in for the swimming pool. That was in the summer. Then September came and the bottom dropped out."

A great hill of dirt remained in the Harts' yard, created when the pit for the swimming pool had been dug. Keith remembers watching it become a mound of weeds as the years progressed and the junky old Caddies multiplied. He describes the scene as something from John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. "We went from the family that had everything, to the Joads almost overnight," Keith says. "I went through my formative years without a lawn, without trees. Nothing. It was just a fight to survive after that."[12]

Chapter seven

Uncle Ed and the Wildcats

Ed Whalen was the almighty voice of the Stampede territory. The promotion had a number of ringside announcers over the years, but none of them, not even Sam Menacker, had Whalen's monumental impact. Not only did he spend the most time on the job – working with Stu off and on for close to forty years – but he also came to define the show's spirit.

Whalen was the host and central personality of the TV show that would come to be known as *Stampede Wrestling*. Wrestlers would come and go, the program's quality would ebb and flow, but Whalen, along with Stu, was the foundation. By the mid-1960s, he was its star. He gave the show its continuity, injecting into the mix a sense of fun that was homespun and endearing. He guided fans through the bizarre twists in the storyline with his colour commentary, selling them the action like a ringmaster at the circus. When fans tuned in for their weekly wrestling fix, the one certainty was that Whalen would be there to greet them like an old friend.

It's strange then that as key as he was to the show's success, Whalen was in no way cut out for the world of professional wrestling. While he enjoyed the guerrilla theatre of the game, he was a tenderfoot who had no stomach for its brutal side, and he always did his best to suppress the ugly stuff the fans so craved, ordering the cameraman to stop filming when things got too bloody. Whalen was moralistic and too conservative in nature for the shock and awe tactics at the heart of the wrestling business.

Stoic Stu faces off against Archie "The Stomper" Gouldie in a war of words in which Gouldie looks ready and willing to get physical. Announcer Ed Whalen is sandwiched between the two. Calgary, late 1960s.

For the most part, Whalen held himself above wrestling and could even be condescending about it. A charismatic if corny sportscaster and a serious journalist whose idol was Walter Cronkite, Whalen seemed to partake in wrestling for little more than a lark. "You might ask what a journalist is doing associated with something you could call the Colgate Comedy Hour," he said with characteristic playfulness in one interview. "It's entertainment. There's more showmanship than sport. It's a modern-day version of the old western mellerdrammer, the good guys and the bad guys and everybody just loving it."[1]

In another interview, Whalen stated, "I've never considered [wrestling] a sport. Some of these 250-pounders object to that, but fortunately, Stu protects me. I have fun with it. If they asked me to do a serious show, I'd refuse. I'm not out to con anybody."[2]

Whalen's wife, Nomi Whalen, a marriage commissioner and a former Calgary alderwoman, says her husband was sometimes embarrassed by his association with wrestling when things got too lurid. "We had a similar view on it," she says. "I can appreciate good acting, but when you have to resort to putting a razor blade in your beard or whatever.... It offended me. It still does. I found the brutality disturbing, and also the fact that a lot of the fans believed what they were seeing was real.... Ed had a love-hate relationship with wrestling. He quit twice because of blood being drawn.... He said it was taking the phoney shit too far." It was only Whalen's close relationship with and respect for Stu that allowed him to return again and again.

Next to Stu, Whalen was arguably the most important figure in the history of the TV show. He gave the show a likable down-home voice, a distinctive identity that set the Calgary promotion apart from other, more powerful, wrestling groups in North America. Promotions in Toronto, Detroit, New York, and Los Angeles had weekly access to stars who Stu could afford to bring in only a few times a year. Those shows had better production values than the single-camera, low-budget program that came out of Calgary. And the Corral was no Maple Leaf Gardens. As for the Victoria Pavilion, which *Calgary Herald* columnist Johnny Hopkins once referred to as "a frontier Taj Mahal,"[3] it was little more than a glorified barn. But this stuff was part and parcel of the charm of *Stampede Wrestling*. It's what made the show so distinctly western Canadian, so special to fans in the region. Nobody drove this point home like Whalen. For everything other wrestling promotions had that Calgary was lacking, what they didn't have was Whalen.

When Whalen developed a rapport with the wrestlers, his cheeky back and forth with them made for hilariously funny moments. The Stampede bad guys had some of their most memorable battles not in physical confron-

tations with other wrestlers but in verbal sparring matches with Whalen.

When Tiger Joe Tomasso boasted about his sexual conquests, referring to his women as birds, Whalen dubbed him "Tweet Tweet" Tomasso. This enraged Tomasso, and he would lunge at Whalen, only to have the announcer brain him with the microphone, to the delight of the crowd. Sometimes Stu would come to Whalen's defence. A sharp slap to the head would send the gremlin-like Tomasso scampering away. It was sheer lunacy, like something out of a Three Stooges feature.

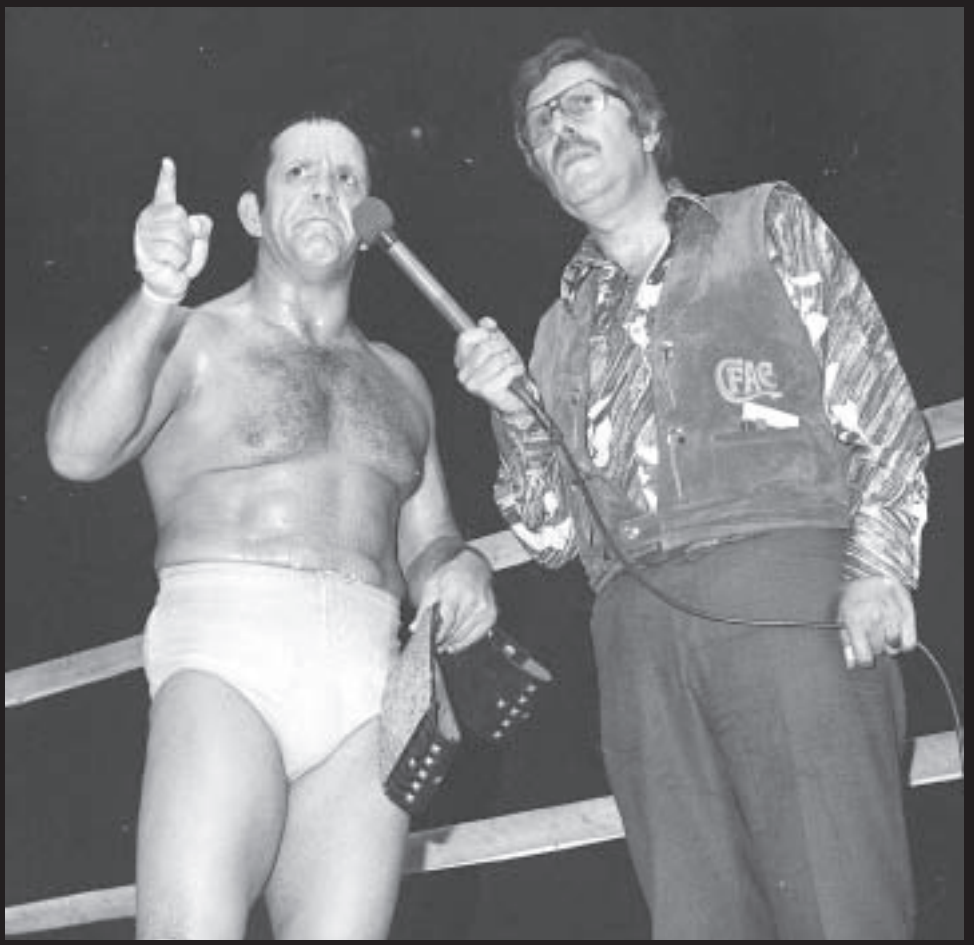
On one occasion, an interview Whalen was conducting broke down into a staged battle between several grapplers, the sort of wild rumble the wrestlers liked to call "a Pier-6 brawl." Whalen calmly dodged the clashing titans, looked into the camera, shrugged, and smoothly quipped like some prairie Rat Packer: "I wonder what my insurance agent is saying right now?"

"He played it tongue-in-cheek," says Nomi. "That's why there were grandmothers watching it with their grandkids. I don't know of any other sport, other than Don Cherry in hockey, where an announcer so owned the show.... Ed was a good actor, and that's why he was Stampede Wrestling."

Although that's an overstatement, there's no question that Whalen embodied the show's personality, bringing a refreshing comic relief to the table, coming across as everybody's favourite uncle. Today, when western Canadians look back fondly on Stampede Wrestling, Uncle Ed's catchphrases, or Whalenisms, replete with a kind of hokey western charm, are recalled as much if not more than the actual matches. A particularly wild bout was dubbed a "ring-a-ding-dong dandy." "Off those ropes!" he'd exclaim when a wrestler was bounced off the ring ropes and careened across the ring. Just before a human collision occurred, Whalen would bellow in his nasally voice, "Look out, Nellie!" The collision itself was called a "malfunction at the junction." When a wicked heel got his just desserts in the form of a sound thrashing, Whalen would cry out like an excited fan, "How suh-weet it is!" In Western Canada, his stock lingo became part of the pop culture lexicon.

Of course, there was the patented weekly sign-off, delivered by a chuckling Whalen with the same cool rhythm each week: "In the meantime, and in between time ... that's it ... for another edition ... of *Stampede Wrestling* ... Bye now." Then the credits rolled and the jaunty theme music, which sounded as if it had been plucked from a Bavarian beer hall, blared from TV sets across the West. It was a joyous experience, and Whalen's shtick was the biggest part of it.

Whalen's first major contribution to the Stampede territory was in 1965 when he used his considerable pull on Calgary television to get Stu's



Top: NWA World Junior Heavyweight champion Nelson Royal cuts a promo with Ed Whalen before putting his title up against the Dynamite Kid during Calgary Stampede Week, 1979.

Bottom: Tiger Joe Tomasso, or "Tweet Tweet" Tomasso as Whalen called him, rants before a match, as Ed looks on, late 1960s.

promotion back on the air, resuscitating it after it flatlined. But Whalen's association with Stu Hart far predated '65. The two men met in 1952 at a wrestling card in Saskatoon. Whalen was twenty-four years old, doing his premed degree at the University of Saskatchewan.

A meek youngster, Whalen grew up painfully shy, burdened with a sense of shame because two bouts of rheumatic fever had left him physically weak and because his father worked as a janitor at his high school. Smart and sensitive with a creative flair, Whalen found, as a performer and media personality, the confidence he had been lacking. During the Second World War, he had a gig as a singer in a swing band and acted in local theatre productions. To pay his way through university, he did on-air work at the local radio station, CFQC. The blossoming personality found another way to supplement his income in 1952, when Stu offered him work as a ring announcer once a week for the Big Time Wrestling shows at Saskatoon Arena.

Inevitably, Whalen's love of broadcasting won out over any aspirations he had to study medicine, and he dropped out of university to work full-time at the radio station. When TV arrived on the Prairies, Whalen was entranced by the medium and, by 1955, had worked his way to Calgary's CHCT-TV as the station's news and sports director. When Stu got on TV in 1956, he once again offered Whalen work. Menacker was the big man with Big Time at that point, but Whalen was often on hand, providing a second voice and filling in whenever needed. Watching an episode of *Mat Time* from about 1960, it's evident that Whalen had not yet come into his own as a wrestling announcer. His delivery was confident enough. There was even a trace of the wit that would later be his calling card as he described heel Tarzan Tourville as being "about as popular as a garbage sandwich." But he lacked the charming presence he later developed. His look wasn't as distinctive in those days either, his balding head and clean-shaven face barely resembled the toupee and moustache-wearing gent western Canadians would come to know and love.

Ed got a long break from the wrestling business in the early 1960s when Stu moved over to rival station CFCN. When that ill-fated venture went under, the Harts found themselves in dire straits. Stu was desperately trying to attract financing to relaunch the promotion but had been turned down by several banks. He was forced to take out a second mortgage on the Hart home. Even putting food on the table was a challenge. Finally, in 1965, after months of negotiating, Stu was able to return to his original TV haunt, CHCT, which had by then changed its call letters to CFAC. Whalen deserves much of the credit for this. He had clout at the TV station and when he backed Stu in

his pitch for a new wrestling program, offering to be the full-time announcer for the show, it improved Stu's chances immeasurably.

Still, there was one more obstacle to overcome. Stu was required to pay a set-up fee of $1,000 to get the new show – to be shot every Friday at the Victoria Pavilion – up and running. It's a testament to how poor the Harts were at this time that Stu could not come up with the money. He was forced to borrow it from a friend. "That loan helped save our bacon," Stu later said.[4]

With the bacon saved, the Prairie wrestling promotion was reborn as Wildcat Wrestling. It was an appropriate name considering the cast of hellions who came on board.

The black Gorgeous George. That's how Stu described Sweet Daddy Siki, one of the great heels of the Wildcat era. It fit, as Siki's act was the jive talkin' equivalent of George Wagner's.

The 255-pound African-American, born Reginald Siki in Texas, entered the ring sporting sunglasses with sparkling frames, a long, pink cigarette holder in his mouth. He wore a sequined tux with tails, admiring himself all the while with not one but two handheld mirrors so he could capture every angle as he strutted before the fans. His most striking feature was his bleach-blond afro; his eyebrows, dyed the same colour, made for a sharp contrast with his chocolate-brown skin.

Siki was the epitome of arrogance, seldom making eye contact during his interviews with Whalen because he was too busy admiring himself in his mirrors. He declared himself "the sweetest dude in wrestling," as well as "the ladies' pet and the men's fret." There may have been some truth to that. Despite the similarities between Sweet Daddy and Gorgeous George, Siki's persona was never as fey as that of his white counterpart. Mr. Irresistible, as Siki used to call himself, bragged about his womanizing, telling people that the women he met in Montreal gave him the name Sweet Daddy.

As Keith Hart recalls it, Siki had a girlfriend at the time, the daughter of a prominent University of Calgary professor. "He drove around with her all over town. It was very flamboyant," Keith says. "You had the blond-haired black guy with this tall, leggy white girl with great big hair, eyelashes two inches long, and this super tight mini skirt. She looked like one of the Chiffons."

Siki's interviews were highlighted by his dismissal of the competition Stu had for him, saving his greatest ridicule and contempt for "that silly old pig farmer" Dave Ruhl – and riling up every farmer and farmer's son in the audience in the process. "He'd get everybody so angry, they were dying to see

him lose," says Dave Ruhl's son, Glenn, "and who better for him to be defeated by than this down-to-earth grassroots hero?"

Inevitably, Ruhl would come out in his black suit and tie and polished cowboy boots to challenge Sweet Daddy in the name of good rural folk everywhere. Siki would sucker punch Ruhl and abuse him for a while, heaping on the humiliation. One week, he tied a dead chicken around Ruhl's neck. Even more grotesque, he later crowned his enemy with a pig's head. The resulting feud sold out the Corral for five weeks, and it continued to rage, off and on, until Siki left the territory in 1970.

"I remember them wrestling for a solid hour," wrote Bret Hart in the *Calgary Sun*. "You could smell the sweat and the cigarette smoke in the air and everyone was left hanging right to the last second. Sweet Daddy gave Ruhl three or four drop kicks in the dying seconds and just when Siki thought he had him right where he wanted him, Dave slapped that full nelson on and the house exploded."[5]

Siki had other memorable feuds in Western Canada, but they seldom matched the chemistry that he and Ruhl generated together. Bud Osborne remembers having a rough time with Mr. Irresistible. "Stu wanted me to put Siki over one night, and I agreed to," says Osborne. "But he was making me look a little too bad, and I took exception to it. So he was picking me up and I let go with a shot right in his sack." Stu was furious when Osborne got back in the dressing room. "He said, 'You son of a bitch! You bastard! Now I can't trust you.' He never raised his voice. Not ever. He just had this low guttural growl and when it got really low, you knew you were in trouble."

Both Ruhl and Siki were along for the ride in what was one of the great misadventures of that era, during one of the promotion's infrequent tours through Alaska. Accompanied by Stu, the stars of Wildcat Wrestling made the trek across the narrow, winding roads of the Alaska Highway, two thousand miles from Calgary. As in so many wrestling stories, with embellishment and the passage of time clouding memories, details of the trip are murky. Did the incident occur in Anchorage? Juneau? Fairbanks? It's no longer clear, and it doesn't particularly matter. It's the craziness of the trip that earns it its immortality.

The drive was treacherous, and when the wrestlers finally reached their destination, testy as hell, they went to the hotel watering hole for a few cocktails. A woman in the bar patted midget wrestler Sky Low Low on the top of his head. Insulted, he leapt up and grabbed her by the throat. "That's it, the wrestlers are in town!" laughs Glenn Ruhl, whose father told him the story.

As Stu recalled, the three-foot-eight, eighty-six pounder went on a

rampage, drop kicking both the woman and her husband. "Siki grabbed Sky Low Low under his arms and [Sky] was yelling at Sweet Daddy, 'Put me down! Put me down!' That little weasel tried to get away from Siki and everybody was laughing.... The people he had drop kicked got out of there, saying, 'This is a bunch of nuts here!' Sky was on fire.... He was such a short-tempered little devil."[6]

Such drunken, violent outbursts were not uncommon from the Montreal-born "Little Atlas." But Sky Low Low, whose bald head and tough face made him look like a pint-sized version of the man on the Mr. Clean container, was a big draw. Touring from territory to territory with his babyface nemesis, the mohawk-sporting Little Beaver, the midget stars used to command up to 15 percent of the gate at cards they appeared on.[7]

To Stu, they were worth it. Midgets were a novelty attraction back then, and Little Beaver and Sky in particular gave the fans plenty of action and belly laughs for their buck. When Beaver struck Sky, the bald midget toppled end-over-end cartoon style, coming to rest upside down, balanced on his head like a wobbly bowling pin.

The life of a midget wrestler was tough and often sad. Sky Low Low had a complex about his size that made him an angry fellow, especially when drunk. He was a full-time carouser, constantly chasing women, but he had his heart broken many times by girlfriends who made off with his money.[8] Despite his temper, Sky Low Low enjoyed cracking the boys up with his blunt sense of humour. On the notorious Alaska trip, Stu decided to take advantage of the kitchen in his hotel room and cook the men dinner. One thing the kitchen didn't have was a pot for Stu to mix the ground meat in. Ever industrious, the promoter emptied a trash can to use. Sky Low Low walked in, saw Stu's unsanitary methods and, taking a beer from the fridge, walked back to the party in the next room without saying a word.

That evening, as the wrestlers dug in to a feast of cabbage rolls, plenty of compliments were directed at Stu, until Sky piped up like a hardened Spanky from a *Little Rascals* episode: "Guys, these aren't cabbage rolls, they're garbage rolls!" The remark caused a stir, and much merriment, but the feast went on unabated. Such was life: weird, wild, and frequently unappetizing on the road.

Another wildcat star was "Mormon Giant," Don Leo Jonathon, who stood six-foot-six and weighed 340 pounds. Although he made better money in other territories, Jonathon loved Western Canada and returned to it a few times each year in the mid-1960s. He came from the prairies of southern Utah and

felt at home on the plains. An avid hunter, he also loved "varmint shooting" in the region.

Trained by his father, Jonathon, born Don Heaton in 1931, had been grappling since the age of three. After a stint in the U.S. Navy, he decided to turn pro. He first appeared in Calgary in the early 1960s, an imposing figure with a mountainous frame and bushy, black mutton chops.

"Don Leo was one of my favourite men," Stu gushed in one interview. "That big man could do backflips and somersaults and nip-ups like a cat."[9]

Jonathon feuded with Dave Ruhl, Sweet Daddy Siki, and New Brunswick's Yvon Cormier, who wrestled as The Beast. But his biggest war was with a Quebec street fighter named George Stipich. That beef had legitimate roots. "Me and him go all the way back to Chicoutimi in northeastern Quebec," says Jonathon. "He had a little gang there and every week they used to come take potshots at the wrestlers. He was big and fast.... I'd already had a few run-ins with him, caught a few glancing blows. One night, one of the Frenchmen said, 'That kid is looking to clean your clock tonight. Watch for him 'cause he's gonna come in from the corner and blindside you.'"

Jonathon, on his guard after the match, was heading back to the dressing room when he saw the kid coming for him. "I pretended I didn't see him," says Jonathon, jolly at the memory of it. "I waited till he cocked his fist. When he swung, I ducked, threw an uppercut, and knocked him out cold. I set him up! I never seen him back at the matches after that."

The next time the Mormon Giant laid eyes on his attacker, the kid was in a Calgary dressing room, now a wrestler himself and going by the name Stan Stasiak. Getting knocked out by Jonathon had been a turning point for the brash youngster. "I'm surprised to see you here," said Jonathon. Stasiak replied in a bullish yet respectful tone, "After our last little run-in, I figured I better learn something, so I came to see Stu. I'm lucky you didn't kill me."

The two men had a laugh and started making plans to work together. Their feud was one of the hottest of the Wildcat era, with Jonathon's giant jungle cat moves pitted against Stasiak's mad bull approach and his deadly heart punch. The heart punch was exactly what it sounds like: a stiff shot to his opponent's chest, sold as if it could stop the organ from pumping were Stasiak to land his fist just right.*

Jonathon says that despite his love of the territory, Stu stopped booking him because of a rib that frightened the hell out of the usually unflappable

*Stasiak wound up in the WWWF, even holding the world heavyweight title for nine days in 1973.

promoter. One night on the merciless Stampede loop, six wrestlers, Stu included, were jammed into one of the promoter's clunky Cadillacs, making an overnight run back to Calgary. Stu drove while the boys gobbled sandwiches and downed beer. Soon everybody had fallen asleep, their heads and bellies full. Stu was exhausted and afraid he might nod off at the wheel. Jonathon offered to relieve him.

A couple of hours passed, and sleepiness was beginning to overcome Jonathon as well. He was fading fast, trying desperately to stay awake as he crossed the endless prairie. Off in the distance he saw the light of a train coming his way. There was a railroad crossing up ahead. Jonathon stuck the car in neutral and coasted toward the tracks. In a moment of devilish inspiration, he punched Stu in the arm and shouted, "Hey, Stu! Do you think I can make it?" As Stu awoke with a start, Jonathon stomped on the gas pedal, making the engine roar as if he were going to try to beat the train. Stu screamed like a man falling from a cliff, clawing at the roof of the car.

Jonathon coasted to the edge of the tracks before his passenger realized he was the victim of a gag. "Stu took over the driving after that," the big man says, "and you can better believe he was wide awake, too.... I didn't think it would scare everyone as bad as it did. But I sealed my fate then and there. After that, Stu never did call me."

Jonathon missed the territory greatly, and one day he talked to his old friend Stasiak about it. When Stasiak asked Stu why he hadn't booked Jonathon in such a long time, he was met with the grumbling, ornery reply: "Ehh, bastard likes to chase trains."

The name "Wildcat Wrestling" was changed to Stampede Wrestling in the fall of 1967. Wildcat had been a fine name, but the Stampede moniker captured the promotion's identity right down to its western roots. After all, since 1952, people had been flocking to Calgary's Stampede grounds every week to see this insane soap opera play out. There was a wild, woolly flavour to the show too, like a day at the rodeo, filmed as it was in that smoky old barn, the Victorian Pavilion. The show's Calgary-centric persona was further entrenched with Ed Whalen, one of the city's top TV personalities, as the program's sole host.

If the promotion was Calgary to the core, than what better title for it than Stampede Wrestling? Didn't the Calgary Stampede define this little western Canadian city in the eyes of the world? Attendance for the week-long party was fast approaching one million visitors a year. Wisely, Stu had long tried to run his promotion to complement the Stampede. Not only were the year's

big angles and feuds brought to a climax during Stampede week in July, but it was also a time when Stu went all out, bringing in the top draws in the wrestling world – Andre the Giant and world champions such as Harley Race – to take on his stars. He would also bring in sports celebrities, usually retired boxing champions such as Rocky Marciano and Joe Louis, as guest referees. They'd be given the hero's welcome, introduced with much fanfare at the rodeo grandstand shows. It lent a world-class air to the Stampede, and it helped promote the week's wrestling cards.

"Professional wrestling has become a popular addition to the Stampede," trumpeted the Calgary Stampede's general manager Maurice Hartnett in the July 4, 1964, *Calgary Herald*. For his part, Stu said, "We're more than happy to be a part of Canada's biggest show."[10] Stu and Helen had also become a permanent fixture of one of the Stampede's exclusive wingdings, the Hays Breakfast. When such dignitaries as Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and entertainer Bob Hope visited the Stampede, they invariably wound up at the Hays Breakfast, where they were introduced to the Harts, among Calgary's other elite.

Even the Hart children had become a part of the Stampede. The local media loved to catch Stu's brood taking part in the festivities. The cameras captured them posing with visiting celebrities, horsing around on the midway, and digging in to ears of corn. "The Harts never met a camera they didn't like," says Helen's brother-in-law Jock Osler.

From at least 1957 onward, the wrestling promotion played a big part in the spirited Stampede parade, which wound its way through downtown Calgary on the event's opening day. Every year, Stu and company joined the procession of colourful floats, usually atop a wrestling ring on wheels, bending and creaking under the weight of the rasslers. The eccentric cast rode through the city centre, posing and waving to happy parade-goers, or scowling at them, depending on their characters.

"Stu never hit a parade where he was fully prepared," laughs Stampede photographer Bob Leonard. For several parades, Stu stationed Leonard on the float with a microphone to hype the stars of Stampede Wrestling. "Most often the float was a wrestling ring with aircraft tires," Leonard says. "[To pull it] we used Cadillacs, pickup trucks, John Deere tractors.... Then you might have the world champion in a convertible with a big banner on it. But we always had our share of catastrophes."

Leonard chuckles remembering one year in which, one after another, three of the four tires blew beneath the ring. When the first and second tires went flat, the ring skewed sideways, limping along the parade route.

Stu ordered that the show go on. But when the third tire blew, the wrestling float ground to a halt, holding up the whole event in front of thousands of parade-goers and a national television crew. The parade marshall was furious. "Stu! Get that thing outta here!" he yelled, ranting that wrestling would never again be part of the Stampede parade. But every year, Stu and his crew showed up with another rolling disaster.

Ross Hart says it always ended up being a "colossal embarrassment. I'm amazed the Stampede people even let my dad enter [the parade] after a while."

Stu often used the parade as an excuse to fire up a feud while the world watched. In 1965, he tried to orchestrate a battle between the hated pseudo-Nazi Waldo Von Erich (actually a Toronto boy by the name of Wally Sieber) and retired boxing great Rocky Marciano while the two rode a float together. Von Erich did his best to provoke the sixty-one-year-old Marciano by pulling his cowboy hat down over his eyes. Stu was hoping the original Italian Stallion would swing a punch, setting up a match that could be finished in the ring. "We could've sold out the Corral the next week," Stu told *Saturday Night* magazine. "The place would burn up."

But Marciano refused to play along. "Just clench your fist, anything," Stu told him. "But Marciano didn't want any part of it," said Stu. "He was … self-righteous or something. He thought all this wrestling stuff was comedy."[11]

Over the years, two of the larger-than-life parade favourites were the McGuire Twins, Benny and Billy, from North Carolina. Weighing 814 and 784 pounds respectively, the brothers, recognized as the world's heaviest twins in the *Guinness Book of World Records*, worked as wrestlers in the 1970s and, as a freak show attraction, they were a big draw come Stampede time.

In the parade they rode a pair of Honda mini-bikes, which they endorsed, riding the machines across the country, presumably to demonstrate the bikes' mettle. One of the bikes blew a tire on the parade route and the twin riding it had to waddle along for the remainder of his journey. It nearly killed the lumbering brute. "They had no stamina," remembers Ross Hart. "They were so heavy, they could barely walk from the Pavilion dressing room to the ring."

Because of their size, the McGuires couldn't attempt most wrestling moves. Their act consisted of choreographed spots, usually involving the wrestlers running into them and bouncing back as if they'd hit a fortress of blubber. The McGuires piled on top of their opponents, one on the other, squishing the man on the bottom. "I've had wrestlers poo-poo in their pants from the weight," Benny McGuire was quoted saying.[12]

Another eye-popping Stampede attraction, albeit in a completely different way, was exotic dancer Babette Bardot, a blond Swede whose

Babette Bardot chats with "Cowboy" Dan Kroffat, proudly holding a wrestling trophy won during a mid-1970s card at the Calgary Stampede, while midget star Little Beaver brandishes a sledgehammer, as if he's about to wreak havoc.

bountiful bosom was constantly threatening to burst loose from her low-cut, cleavage-baring tops. With measurements of 44-24-38, this over stuffed cheesecake, who claimed to be a second cousin of sex symbol Brigitte Bardot, had appeared on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* and *The Merv Griffin Show*. She began appearing in a Calgary hotel in the early 1970s as a nightclub singer and exotic dancer.

Bardot made a splash, attracting the wrestlers, who took in her act before the road trips. Recognizing an opportunity, in 1973 Stu crowned Bardot Miss Stampede Wrestling, and had her ride on the float during a number of Stampede parades over the years. She too got caught up in Stampede Wrestling's yearly disaster on the parade route when the wrestling float broke down, spooking the horse she was riding on. The horse bucked the scantily-clad Bardot to the road and she grew hysterical, her bust heaving in front of awestricken parade-goers and the drooling Hart boys.

For several consecutive summers, Miss Stampede Wrestling appeared on the *Stampede Wrestling* TV show as a celebrity guest, presenting awards such as outstanding wrestler or rookie of the year to various grapplers. She was also on hand to greet the world champion or a star such as Andre the Giant. Andre was said to have been smitten with Bardot, who gave him a peck on the cheek on TV. This infatuation was cute but at times troublesome. When Bardot was in town, Andre refused to wrestle anywhere she wasn't, even though Stu wanted him to make appearances all along the circuit.[13]

"The Eighth Wonder of the World," Andre the Giant, was the greatest of all the Stampede attractions. Until Hulk Hogan became a mainstream star in the mid-1980s, there was no bigger star in wrestling history. From Grenoble, France, Andre Rene Rousimoff was afflicted with acromegaly, a glandular disease that causes a chronic secretion of growth hormones in the body. But in 1964, when he began his wrestling career, at the age of eighteen, Andre was still lean, muscular, and agile. Things took off in 1970 when he moved to Montreal and began selling out the Montreal Forum repeatedly.

Eventually, Vince McMahon Sr. took over Andre's bookings and put the Giant on a permanent world tour, renting him out to promoters – from Canada and the United States to New Zealand and Japan – who knew having Andre on the card meant sold-out arenas. By the mid-'70s, the Giant had become a pop culture novelty, with appearances on *The Tonight Show* and *The Six Million Dollar Man*. In 1987, he had a role in the Rob Reiner movie *The Princess Bride*.

By the time he reached his prime, Andre stood at six-foot-eleven and tipped the scales at 350 pounds, a weight that eventually climbed to 550. When his height peaked, Andre's disease spread to his limbs and his skull

grew to freakish proportions. If he grabbed an opponent by the face, the man's entire head would disappear within Andre's massive hand.

Andre was, for the most part, a friendly giant. He knew that he would not live long with his condition and was determined to eat, drink, and be merry. Because of his size, he could drink astonishing amounts of alcohol. Stories abound of Andre's consumption. It wasn't uncommon for him to drink a case of wine in one sitting. He could knock back fifty bottles of beer and walk away only slightly tipsy. Because drunken merry-making is the order of the day at Calgary's Stampede festivities, Andre loved wrestling for Stu during the event. It was written into his contract that four bottles of red wine be left in his dressing room, the contents of which would be swishing in his belly by the time he entered the ring.

Andre's greatest Stampede performance was in 1977, when he squared off against NWA champion Harley Race, a rugged grappler from Missouri who is recognized as one of the all-time greats of the wrestling biz. At 250 pounds, with steel plates in his forearm from a car accident – his death grip could supposedly snap a pair of pliers – Race was an awesome physical presence.[14] But he posed no threat whatsoever to Andre, who threw him twenty feet across the ring so hard that Race broke several of the wood planks beneath the mat. As per the storyline, Race hung on to his title that night, but only because the Giant played along.

He didn't have to. Bret Hart recalls fighting Andre and having the Giant step on his throat with his size twenty-two boot, making Bret's face turn blue. "At that moment, I understood why Andre did this to everyone he worked with," Bret wrote in the *Calgary Sun*. "It was his way of secretly letting me know he could kill me for real anytime he wanted."[15]

With disease spreading through his body, it was inevitable that Andre would meet a sad end. By the 1980s, he had grown to such proportions that his movements were stifled. Near the end of his career, he was bloated and in constant pain. This did little to thwart his popularity, and he made sports history in 1987 at WrestleMania III. The angle, pitting the colossus of the 1970s against the new giant, '80s icon Hulk Hogan, was a natural and played up beautifully. A record crowd of seventy-eight thousand fans poured into the Silverdome in Pontiac, Michigan, to watch Andre take on the Hulkster. It was wrestling's first live gate to shatter the million-dollar mark, grossing U.S.$1,599,000 plus $5.2 million in closed-circuit pay-per-view revenues.[16]

Andre's physical condition continued to deteriorate and by the time he wrestled his final matches in 1992, barely able to move in the ring, he had become a sad sight to even the most naive fans. He died in his sleep from heart failure on January 27, 1993.

Top: Harley Race drops his knee on Andre the Giant's head, Edmonton, 1970s. Race defended his world title belt against Andre several times in Stampede Wrestling. During this particular match, Race lifted the Giant, bringing all 500 pounds down on the mat for a rumbling body slam – more than a decade before Hulk Hogan pulled off the feat at WrestleMania III.

Bottom: Helen Hart warmly embraces Andre the Giant in downtown Calgary during Stampede Week, mid-1970s.

The Harts didn't just do business with these bizarre characters, they also opened their homes to them. Helen was a creative sort with a literary flair, and there's no question she got a kick out of these pirates, carnies, and eccentrics who passed through her home. Every day, the Stampede Wrestling circus yielded new mind-boggling stories, new adventures, new extraordinary pictures for the scrapbook.

But running such a sideshow was a life of little stability, and over the years the pressure got to Helen. This was not the path she would have chosen. Wrestling was not her great passion as it was Stu's, and Helen found it hard to cope with the constant ups and downs of the business. Especially when they threatened to ruin her massive family, which had swelled to twelve children when Owen was born in 1965. Rich one day and in the poorhouse the next. It was too much to take, and at times she resented the wretched wrestling business.

Stu always took the hardships in stride, believing that no hurtle was insurmountable and that tomorrow would be a better day. Helen, on the other hand, worried herself sick. According to Diana Hart, the pressures drove her mother to drink. This is one of the most contentious points of Diana's autobiography, *Under the Mat*, and several of the Hart children vehemently deny it. But hints of the pattern Helen was developing are evident in "Harts and Cauliflowers," the autobiographical essay Helen wrote in the early 1970s.

On the stress of raising twelve children, Helen writes: "I am an anxiety-prone candidate for Snap City. With me, worrying is an art.... Almost from the very start, Stu and I were outnumbered and outmaneuvered, and this we accept, each coping in his own way. Stu drinks tea and often whistles, 'We shall overcome;' I turn to gin and tonic and, it being a big house, I hide a lot.... The other evening as Stu and I surveyed the downstairs disaster area we beheld the wall-to-wall children, clutter, pets, laughter, life. Eyes wet with emotion (and only partly attributable to that last gin and tonic), I murmured to him, 'Ah, look at them. When will they be like this again?'

'Tomorrow,' he said.'"[17]

Like most of her brothers and sisters, Alison Hart was stung that Diana exposed the family's private business. She acknowledges that at times her mother used alcohol as a crutch but stresses Helen was never anything other than perfectly poised in public. "I don't think that was a fair depiction," she says. "My mother was a very strong woman. She was a good parent ... a sweet, loving person ... and that was, unfortunately, her coping mechanism.... But to depict her as a raging alcoholic is a lie. It's not right."

Chapter eight

Butchers, Stompers, and Cheats

"Got to kick at the darkness till it bleeds daylight," sings Bruce Cockburn in his 1983 hit "Lovers in a Dangerous Time." Nothing else nails the coming of "The Stomper" so squarely on the head. Archie "The Stomper" Gouldie, hailing from a dairy farm in the sleepy Alberta town of Carbon, seventy-five miles northeast of Calgary, stomped away – with his size thirteen cowboy boots – the economic clouds that loomed over Stu's business for most of the 1960s. He ushered in a period of prosperity for Stampede Wrestling, and many of the promotion's key players, including Bret Hart and photographer Bob Leonard, consider him the single greatest heel to ever terrorize the territory.

Nobody saw such greatness in the teenager when he first appeared on the scene in the late '50s. He was just another tough guy, a townie who thought he had it in him to lick a wrestler. Gouldie had been coming to the wrestling matches for years, studying the proceedings intently.

In his early twenties, Gouldie moved to Calgary, where he managed a service station. The darkly tanned, husky kid with the burning glare was also venting his aggression, crushing gorilla-sized gladiators on the football field for the North Hill Colts. But his wrestling obsession had not faded. Gouldie dreamed of climbing into that ring, and the hunger to do so was burning a hole in his belly.

Finally, one night at the Pavilion, the fan decided to make his move. He marched up to the ringside, snatched Ed Whalen's mike, and hollered

Archie "The Stomper" Gouldie, scourge of the Stampede territory, lays a massive boot to former Hamilton Tiger-Cat Angelo "King Kong" Mosca, early 1970s.

murderous threats, challenging the formidable Mills Brothers as they made their way to the ring. They invited the brash young bruiser to come up and prove himself. Archie was about to when the police escorted him, barking at the grapplers like a mad dog, out of the building.[1]

In the weeks that followed, Gouldie was back, again trying to prove himself with the wrestlers. Stu warned him that he might be hurt if he stepped in the ring. Gouldie growled in reply, proclaiming that he was going to become a pro wrestler and he was willing to take his chances. "Don't take it lightly till you've tested it," Stu said. "Come on down to my house. I have a gym in the basement. If you can handle me, I'll give you some of my men."

Gouldie accepted the invitation. Stu, having lured a new victim to the Dungeon, stretched the young man without mercy. "I scared the hell out of him," Stu told the Glenbow Museum. "I really worked him over.... His forehead down on his belly button ... his face purple from trying to escape. You get panicky.... He was so fearful that he didn't come back for another three or four months." Nobody expected Gouldie to return after the shock of his Dungeon visit, but eventually he showed up at Stu's door. "Sir, I appreciate you tipping me off about how ugly wrestling is," Gouldie said politely, and implored Stu to train him. The stretchings continued.

Gouldie, his mother, and his wife lived about five miles from Hart House and, on some training days, the wannabe wrestler trudged through snow and freezing winds to be savagely tortured before limping back home. "I'd keep going – until he hurt me so bad, I couldn't go. I'd take a couple of days off and I'd go back," Gouldie recalls.[2] My mother used to shake her head and say, 'There's something wrong with you, boy.'"

Gouldie thought at times that he was dealing with a supernatural force. "I seen [Stu] walk outside in his bare feet with about a foot of snow on the ground," he says. "It was twenty below zero and a car drove into the yard. Stu walked out to talk to them. He stood out there with no shoes or socks for a good forty minutes."

Keith Hart has a vivid memory of The Stomper's days in the Dungeon. "I remember one time my dad heeled him in the nuts," Keith says matter-of-factly. "He put him in a double grapevine [a wrestling hold] and stuck his ankles in between Archie's legs to ride him down. It's just like spurring a horse. But he spurred him right in the balls." Keith, just a boy at the time, remembers Gouldie crawling to the bench, spent. "He looked at me and said, 'Hey kid, ever seen a swollen nut before? Look what your old man done to me.'" Archie pulled his trunks to the side and out popped his bruised testicle. "It was like a big coconut," Keith says.

Most men whither under such siege. Archie toughened up. A 1967 *Calgary Herald* article captured Gouldie's steely resolve to do whatever it took to make it in the wrestling business: "[If I have to] I'll carry Stu up to the highest peak at Banff," he said.[3]

Stu finally put Gouldie on the card in 1962, but not to wrestle the main-eventers Gouldie had been gunning for. Instead, he worked the preliminary matches, usually doing jobs, getting beat to make other grapplers look good. "Stu never put me over," Gouldie says. "You've got to prove yourself to him. You've got to prove that you can make the right moves and be the right kind of person." After a year on the bottom rung, though, Gouldie was fed up. He decided he had to venture out and start fresh in other territories. When he made his name away from home, Stu would have to give him his due.

The Stomper persona was born in Kansas City, Missouri. At first he was reinvented, oddly enough, as the Mongolian Stomper. "He was the only Scottish Mongolian I ever met," laughs Bob Leonard. It was former world champion Pat O'Connor, then a promoter in the territory, who came up with the character. O'Connor had Gouldie shave his head save for a patch of jet-black hair on the crown of his skull that hung a good ten inches long. He wore it in a ponytail, grew a thick Fu Manchu–style moustache, and came to the ring a vicious, mute Mongolian. In this guise, Gouldie became a top heel in the southern United States. He incensed fans to the point where one stabbed him, in San Francisco, opening a wound that required seventy-four stitches.

Suddenly Archie Gouldie was somebody. And Stu, struggling in 1967, looking for a character who could heat up his territory again, took notice.

When Gouldie returned to Stampede Wrestling, the mute bit of his persona was ditched, the ponytail shorn, and a full shock of close-cropped black hair grown. He wore a horseshoe emblem on his wrestling trunks and a big pair of cowboy boots, which assisted him in stomping his victims into a bloody paste. It made sense that Stampede Wrestling's premier villain should be an Albertan, a vicious cowboy with the intensity of Hang 'Em High Clint Eastwood, had Eastwood's character been totally psychotic.

And Gouldie finally got his turn at the microphone. A terrible tremor shook Stampede country to the core. As devastating as he was in the ring – and Archie Gouldie had become a bone-breaking, blood-taking machine – his interviews were the stuff of legend. A seething cauldron of rage, raving with a craziness that scared children and adults alike, Gouldie, his wild eyes flaming as he unleashed his horrible invectives, was unforgettable. Hunched over and glaring into the camera, his massive shoulder and neck muscles swelling

up tight as if dragon wings were about to sprout from his back, it seemed as if Gouldie was going to burst through TV screens and stomp everyone watching to pieces in their living rooms. Even Whalen stood back and let Gouldie explode. What could anyone add to such a deranged symphony? "I love pain! I love it!" Gouldie would bellow, the veins in his temples bulging as if ready to burst.

Wrestling programs from the period read like previews of bad 1950s monster movies when describing Gouldie: "Here is a man who has absolutely no compassion! Sympathy is an unknown factor to him! Gouldie is like something from outer space … something evil!"[4]

The Stomper tried his best to live up to the ruthless image, and his opponents were frequently carried out of the ring on stretchers. "Why not put wheels on the stretchers?" he suggested to Whalen with glee. "That would make it a lot easier for the fellows carrying them, and it would mean a smoother ride for the guys riding in them. And that is important to me. I may whip up a design for a stretcher with wheels and patent it. The use I could make of it! I'd be a millionaire."[5]

His black humour aside, Gouldie's temper was something to be reckoned with. A notorious tantrum occurred in 1969 when he fought English wrestler Billy Robinson. Robinson was thought to be one of the best legitimate wrestlers in the world. He had been an amateur champion in his younger days and was a star in Europe. When Robinson wanted to break into the North American scene, Stampede Wrestling was his first port of call. Even though he was no looker – his crossed eyes gave him a goony appearance – Robinson was clean-cut, a natural babyface. He was thrown into a program with Gouldie where the two scraped week after week for The Stomper's North American title belt. The storyline called for Gouldie to be the ultimate victor, putting him in line for the end-of-season blow-up at the Calgary Stampede, where he was to take on NWA World Champion Dory Funk Jr., from Texas.

But Gouldie and Robinson did not click. Robinson, said to be arrogant behind the scenes, was known for using shooter tactics on opponents he didn't like, tying up challengers in painful submission holds. Some wrestlers accused Robinson of deliberately trying to injure them in the ring. Robinson wouldn't sell his opponents' moves either. They'd throw their pulled punches at him and, rather than play the part, acting as if the blows hurt him, Robinson remained unfazed. It made a wrestler look weak and ineffective.

Robinson played such games with Gouldie in July 1969 and, after several nights of this, The Stomper was enraged. He stormed into the dressing room, threw his boots against the wall, and left the territory for the

remainder of the year. Stu put Robinson up against the world champion in Gouldie's place.*

Gouldie was hard-nosed, too, when it came to business matters, with a no-nonsense approach to his job. A good angle was to be played out to the letter. He was impatient with the Harts' perpetual lack of organization. "He was a perfectionist, and he'd get frustrated because he was always on time and we were always late," says Keith Hart. "He was super organized. Always had a neat bag. His socks were always pure white. Always had a clean towel in his bag. Nothing was ever dirty or smelly."

Outside the ring, Gouldie had matured into a quiet, soft-spoken gentleman, a clean-living fitness enthusiast.** Those who knew him well say he had a warm, good-humoured side. Few saw it, though, because Gouldie was a loner, selective about who he befriended.

But for fans, who saw only his ring persona, Gouldie was frightening. Bret Hart, who spent his life surrounded by vicious villains, was particularly terrorized by The Stomper as a boy, even having nightmares about him. Bret was traumatized when Gouldie told Whalen he was going to tear Hart House down brick by brick until he found Stu, who he promised to rend limb from bloody limb. Not even Helen would be safe, The Stomper seethed, and he threatened to drag her out onto the interstate and pile-drive her on the road.

Eleven-year-old Bret was trembling with fear the next day, running for cover under the kitchen table, when he saw Gouldie walking up the driveway toward the house, a scowl on his face. Helen answered the door. "Hello dawling," she said in her New York accent and gave The Stomper a hug. That day Bret got an early lesson in the truth behind the family business.

The Stomper was just the monster Stu needed to put the fear of God back into the fans. People had never seen such a vicious beast – at least not since the days Kowalski scourged the territory – and week after week people flocked to the Pavilion, eager to see if Stu's knights could slay the dragon. Most nights, the dragon reigned supreme.

Archie stomped in an era that was outstanding and dynamic, as full of berserk fun as any period in the history of Stu's territory. To many fans, the late

*To Robinson's credit, the matches he had with Funk were incredible. The chemistry between them was so great that Funk returned to Calgary in September 1969 to work another series of sellouts with Robinson.

**He still is. Today, Gouldie, a retired prison guard in his late sixties, delights in biking up to a hundred miles a week near his Knoxville, Tennessee, home, hauling his grandchildren in a baby carriage behind him.

1960s and early '70s represents the promotion's golden age.

Certainly, *Stampede Wrestling* was a hit. TV ratings for 1970–71 reveal that in the Calgary-Lethbridge region a typical *Stampede Wrestling* broadcast drew 114,900 viewers. The show's popularity came close to that of *Hockey Night in Canada*, which drew on average 120,000 viewers.

With a hit TV show and packed houses all along the loop, the company coffers were flowing and healthy once again. The brand new Cadillacs were back. So too was the antique furniture, the tailored suits, and the snake-skin boots, even though Stu was just as comfortable in rags. The wrestlers used to joke that half the time Stu dressed like a hillbilly. Nevertheless, he loved to own the finest things. He even bought a twelve-passenger limousine, which he frequently packed with kids, dogs, and cats.

Not all the credit for the territory's miraculous turnaround is due Gouldie. It was a group effort by a colourful, motley cast that helped bring about the change. Ed Whalen, for one, was never better than in this era. This is where his catchphrases and slick patter began to take shape. This is where Whalen began asserting himself – sometimes to the chagrin of the wrestlers – as part of the show, which he often stole. A 1970 *Calgary Herald* article tells of Whalen climbing into the ring, taking off his glasses and, to the amusement of the crowd, handing them to the referee, who seemed to be the only one in the arena who didn't catch the heel's dirty tactics in the previous match.[6]

When Gouldie arrived, there was already an incredible roster on hand, including Tiger Joe Tomasso, Dave Ruhl, and Sweet Daddy Siki. The Stomper tore into this talent pool mercilessly, soon thumping Ruhl for the Canadian Heavyweight title.

Trying to create a more global image, a new title belt, the North American Heavyweight title was invented in 1968, introduced to western Canadian fans as a much-sought-after championship with a long, glorious history. In the days before the Internet and today's mass media culture, who knew any better? Gouldie's protege, Pat O'Connor, was the man who came to town wearing the belt, to drop it in an epic battle with The Stomper.

Now that the territory was red hot, news travelled fast across the grappling landscape. Soon, Stampede Wrestling was set upon by a mass of phenomenal talents, including the British stars Les Thornton and Geoff Portz, Canuck bruisers Gil Hayes and Big John Quinn, and Puerto Rican superstar Carlos Colon (then called Carlos Belafonte). There was also a young man from Nova Scotia named "Soulman" Rocky Johnson, a superb athlete whose marriage to a wrestling promoter's daughter in Hawaii would spawn Duane Johnson, better known today as wrestling and acting superstar The Rock.

By now Stu's Dungeon was widely celebrated, and wannabe wrestlers queued up to study under the master and work in his territory. Stampede Wrestling became something of an elite school, a stepping stone to wrestling stardom. Leo Burke from New Brunswick wrestling family the Cormiers came to Calgary to learn from Stu and break into the business, despite that he was already solidly trained by his established older brothers The Beast (Yvon Cormier) and Rudy Kay. Both of them had worked for Stu, and when their seventeen-year-old sibling said he wanted to follow in their footsteps, they sent him to the mean old man in Calgary for his final test.

It was the same with little Rick Martel from Quebec City. Rick's brother was the beret-wearing Michel "Mad Dog" Martel, and he too sent his teenage sibling to Stu in 1973. At the time, Rick was a gangly kid, a shy, pretty boy. Once he filled out, Martel went on to a massive career in which he won a world heavyweight title.

Stu also recruited a handful of football players for Stampede Wrestling in this golden era. Among them was Bob Lueck, who Stu pushed as a star attraction for a number of seasons. Lueck's career with Stampede ended around 1973 when his wife, leery of her husband being on the road all the time, issued an ultimatum. But Lueck says Stu always encouraged him to stay out of trouble. "He was a family man," says Lueck. "He lectured me all the time. 'Don't be out there with these fucking ring rats. Keep your nose clean.' I got that shit every day. It did me some good, but it didn't do all the good it should've done."

Another football player Stu recruited was Angelo Mosca, of the Hamilton Tiger-Cats. Mosca, a Canadian Football Hall of Famer, was thought to be one of the fiercest players in the CFL. The Italian-American, from Boston, Massachusetts, wrestled in the off-season, taking up wrestling full time when he retired from the CFL. Standing six-foot-five and weighing 265 pounds, "King Kong" Mosca, who had the ring style of a charging bull, went on to enjoy a successful career in territories all across Canada and the United States.

Today Mosca, sixty-eight, has mixed feelings about Stampede Wrestling. "Some guys liked to keep their thumb on ya," he says, referring to Dave Ruhl. Mosca feels Ruhl, who was the head booker at that time, never liked him and tried to keep him out of the main event matches. Despite his problems with Ruhl, Mosca says he enjoyed his time in Calgary. He made $500 a week, and the notoriety Stu's stars had in the territory came with fringe benefits. "I went through a divorce at that time and there was a lot of broads," he chuckles.

Mosca used to get a kick out of the Hart family, whom he found strange.

"They were the original Osbournes," he says, comparing the Harts to the crude MTV family of rocker Ozzy Osbourne. "[Helen] would say, 'Hello, Angelo. How are you today?' Then in the next breath it would be, 'Where is [Stu], that sonofabitch?'"

He remembers seeing the Hart boys hanging around the dressing room after the matches. "If Stu gave us lousy pay, I'd kick 'em in the ass! They'd go, 'What's that for?' I'd say 'Ahh, I'm gettin' even with your dad.'"

The former football star recalls having to struggle with Stu to get paid. Mosca worked the main event one night at the Pavilion and didn't feel he got his rightful share of the gate. The following week, he was again at the top of the card, and he held up the show, refusing to go to the ring until Stu ponied up. "I want my money for tonight and last week's fuckin' money," growled the Italian "King Kong." Desperate, Stu tried to write Mosca a cheque. "I don't want no fuckin' cheque. I want cash." Stu went to the box office to get the wrestler's money. "I took all that cash, put it in my trunks, and went to the ring," Mosca says.

The biggest fish Stu ever reeled in, in the words of Bret Hart, was Wayne Coleman, a bodybuilder from Paradise Valley, Arizona, who was being scouted by the Calgary Stampeders. Stu was always impressed by large, strong men, and he was bowled over when Coleman, sporting arms twenty-three inches around, approached him in 1969 about becoming a wrestler.

After lifting weights down in the Dungeon, where Stu was further astounded when he bench-pressed 600 pounds, the monstrous Coleman was given his first lesson in wrestling – and humility. "Let me see your head," Stu said to the unsuspecting bodybuilder. Before he knew it, the Hart papa had Coleman – who believed himself invincible – struggling for air in a front facelock, feeling as though his neck was about to snap.[7]

For Coleman's first match, Stu devised an angle in which the bodybuilder ran to the ring in a battle between Mosca and Lueck, interfering on behalf of Mosca. When Stu gave Coleman his instructions, however, Coleman refused to play along. He had nothing against Lueck. Why would he attack him? "I didn't know what was a work and what wasn't," Coleman told an interviewer.[8] Enraged, Stu grabbed his pupil by the throat and said, "You do what I tell you because I'm your boss."

For a time, Coleman and Mosca worked as tag team partners, but behind the scenes the Italian never liked the bodybuilder. "I had no respect for him. He was full of shit.... He didn't know a hammerlock from a padlock. He was a circus freak ... a big juice monkey. Coleman was one of the first guys I ever saw take Dianabol [steroids]."

After working in the Stampede territory for a short time, Coleman went to San Francisco and made the transformation to Superstar Billy Graham, the nickname taken from the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* and the famous evangelist, Billy Graham. The Superstar's look and attitude – the enormous physique; colourful wardrobe; golden tan; long, bleach-blond hair; and fevered, jive-talking lingo – would be enormously influential in the wrestling business. Working for Vince McMahon Sr. in New York, Graham became a huge star in the WWWF, winning the world heavyweight title in 1977. Graham's influence was obvious in the way his look and style was so famously adopted by both Hulk Hogan and future governor of Minnesota Jesse "The Body" Ventura.

For all his positive influence in the wrestling business, Graham was also one of the first megastars to bring steroids into the game in a major way. The book *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks* by Shaun Assael and Mike Mooneyham, an exposé of the underbelly of the wrestling business, says Graham was one of the "most devoted spreaders of the steroid gospel." Graham claims he was the one who turned a young Hulk Hogan onto steroids.[9]

By the late 1980s, however, when his joints were destroyed and he was living in constant pain, Graham radically changed his tune on steroid use. His career ended, and he appeared on national talk shows speaking about rampant abuse of the drug within the WWF. (At the time, the WWF was embroiled in a steroid scandal which led to the U.S. federal government prosecuting Vince McMahon Jr. for distributing the illegal drugs to his wrestlers. McMahon was found not guilty.)[10]

In any case, even after he became the great Superstar Billy Graham, Wayne Coleman never forgot the man who gave him his start in the wrestling business. During Graham's New York peak in the 1970s, a heavy package was shipped to Hart House. It was a TV set, Graham's way of saying thanks. Stu was amused to find a Holiday Inn tag on the back of it.[11]

November 2, 2004. It's the night of the U.S. presidential election and the final counts are rolling in. It's also the night I finally track down Larry Shreeve after weeks of phone calls to his Atlanta, Georgia, restaurant.

"I'm sorry to disturb you on election night," I say to Shreeve, catching him on his cellphone as he leaves Abdullah the Butcher's House of Ribs and Chinese Food. "Were you out voting today?"

It turns out the man known as Abdullah the Butcher couldn't give the slightest damn about either George W. Bush or John Kerry. "Nah. Fuck dat shit," he says. "I gotta take care of my business."

By business he doesn't mean only his restaurant, where, according to the Atlanta Happenings website, he likes to wander around the dining area "smiling and answering questions in a sweet voice," thanking his patrons for choosing Abdullah's.[12] He also means the wrestling business, in which, at the age of sixty-nine, the 360-pound Butcher is still active. Within twenty-four hours of this interview, he'll be on his way to Puerto Rico. In the months to come, he's scheduled to wrestle in Montreal and do a tour of Japan.

He insists he's in great shape, but that's not the description that springs to mind when one sees the most recent pictures of him posted on various wrestling websites. Even in his 1970s prime, Abdullah was a karate-kicking, eye-gouging butterball. Now, as has been his look from the start, he wears loose-fitting karate pants to the ring, pulled up high to cover his massively bloated belly. The folds of his fat, in particular his hideously sagging breasts, fall over his waistband.

That said, he still cuts an imposing, fearsome figure. He looks like somebody who knows how to inflict hurt. Much of that is due to his forehead, which is mangled beyond belief. Abdullah's chopping block of a brow, which in the words of Keith Hart is so thick with scar tissue, "he needs a scimitar to cut through and find a vein," screams mean. That's what forty-three years of cutting will do. Abdullah has spent his life carving up his bald head. The bloodbath is his specialty. He was not the first wrestler to cut himself, to "get juice" for the fans. But he was one of the first to elevate the act to an art form of sorts. The typical Butcher bout consists of rivers of blood, flowing from both his and his opponent's heads – blood raised from forks, bottles, blunt objects, bites. An Abdullah match is designed to be a gory monster movie come to life.

Abdullah pioneered the bloody hardcore matches that are a staple of today's wrestling world. In the 1990s, the ECW (Extreme Championship Wrestling) promotion thrived, with an emphasis on extreme violence. For a time, the WWF established a Hardcore Championship title for such bouts, though few of those matched the raw intensity of Abdullah's ugliest confrontations.

"Sir, I started it all," The Butcher says, annoyed at being mentioned in the same breath as any of his imitators. "People thought they could do what I do, but they couldn't do it. They didn't know how. I am a professional. I know how to take care of business and draw people.... Sometimes it got carried away. I did hurt a lot of people everywhere I went. But I had to make the people believe in it. That's why they kept coming back."

Stu knew it well. Along with Gouldie, Abdullah was his top draw in the

early 1970s. If The Stomper was King Kong, Abdullah was Godzilla.

Larry Shreeve, born and raised in Windsor, Ontario, began studying karate at age twelve. By the time he was in his twenties, he was a seventh-degree black belt, teaching martial arts to the local police. On the side he did maintenance at a gym, which is where he met wrestler Gino Brito. Brito convinced Shreeve he could make a lot of money in the mat game. By the late 1960s, Shreeve had developed the gimmick that would make Brito's prediction come true. Abdullah the Butcher was billed as the "Madman from the Sudan," a North African savage whose insatiable blood lust brought him to the world of wrestling, where he got his jollies feeding on young babyfaces.

When Stu brought Abdullah to Calgary in 1969, he knew right away he had found a cash cow. "I never had an empty house while he was with me," Stu told an interviewer. "On the coldest day of the year I had them lined up on 17th Avenue [outside the Stampede grounds] trying to get into the [Corral]."[13]

Behind the scenes, Stu and Helen welcomed Abdullah like he was family, even baking him a cake on his birthday. But when the TV cameras were on, it was a different matter. Stu, well into his fifties, was still wrestling every so often, and he had a feud with The Butcher. One Friday night, Abdullah threw pepper in Stu's eyes and tore into the promoter with such ferocity that it scared the younger Hart children, who watched their dad being slaughtered on TV. A few days later, The Butcher phoned Hart House to talk to Stu. Alison, about twelve at the time, answered. "'I'm not going to let you talk to my dad! Are you crazy? How dare you?'" she said, horrified. "I kept hanging up on him. Finally, he got his girlfriend to call and [not knowing her] I put her through. Then she put Abdullah on to my dad. He must've been calling for an hour." Later that day, Stu gently reprimanded his daughter: "The next time Abdullah calls, you might want to put him through. Don't worry about me. I can deal with him."

Being kept in the dark about the wrestling business must have played havoc on the minds of the Hart kids. One day, Stu was sharing a slice of cake with Abdullah the Butcher. The next day, the beast was butchering daddy before the eyes of the city. What were they supposed to think? Stu believed in the business so fervently that only insiders were let in on the secrets, and until they got into the business themselves, the kids were not confidants. It lent a sense of surrealism to the children's lives that had to have been troubling at times.

Even Ed Whalen got caught up in the insanity once in a while, forgetting it was all an act. That was easy to do when the heel was as overwhelming as

Top: Abdullah the Butcher launches his 300-pound frame across the ring, bringing a flying elbow drop down on another foe, early 1970s.

Bottom: The gruesome Abdullah the Butcher takes a bite out of the bloody forehead of Carlos Belafonte. Belafonte came to fame in his native Puerto Rico – and around the world – as Carlos Colon.

Abdullah. Once, Whalen was interviewing Billy Robinson in the ring when Abdullah came barging in and attacked the English wrestler. The madman snatched Whalen's microphone from his hand and began strangling Robinson with the cord, all according to the plans cooked up in the dressing room. But Whalen, who was not in on the twist, was a big fan of Robinson's. Furthermore, the mike belonged to Whalen, and he became incensed when the wrestlers grabbed it from him. Announcers in other territories typically cowered before the monster heels in their territory, selling the fearsomeness of the beasts. Not Whalen.

After a struggle, Whalen regained his mike and smashed Abdullah on the head with it, cutting open The Butcher's scalp. In retaliation, the brute clubbed Whalen, which the announcer later told people gave him an eighteen-month headache. A genuine battle was about to break out between the two men when Stu ran into the ring and got between them. Seeing red, Whalen tried to get around Stu to throw a punch at The Butcher. Stu's whispered warning brought the announcer to his senses. "If I let you go, you're dead."[14] Whalen had become a mark, just like the fans. It wouldn't be the last time.

Realizing he had lost his cool, Whalen felt badly, but he knew there was no apologizing to an angry Abdullah, whose head required seven stitches. A few weeks later, around Christmas time, Whalen was in the Calgary airport awaiting a flight when he saw The Butcher walking toward him, having just arrived from Japan. Whalen was petrified. He looked around in a panic but couldn't see a cop. He was already picturing the ambulance ride ahead of him. "Only my laundry man knows how scared I was, y'know what I mean?" Whalen would later say. But instead of attacking the announcer, Abdullah handed him a package. "Here," he grunted. "Open."

"I'll never forget it," Whalen said. "Three hundred pounds … and not much brains, bless his heart, and he looked at me and said, 'Whalen, when you get that look in your eye, you make me nervous.'" Then he walked away. In the package was a beautiful silk kimono. Abdullah respected Whalen for standing up to him, and he forgave the announcer for the mike to the head. What were a few more stitches, after all? The fight excited the fans, and when the fans were excited, money was made.

Naturally, Stu pitted his two greatest monsters against one another the first chance he got. Archie the Stomper versus Abdullah the Butcher was a dream match, a work of sublime violence, made all the more intense by the genuine dislike the two men had for one another. "They were jealous of each other," said Stu. "Abdullah, he'd make out that he couldn't remember Archie's

name.... Archie would calmly refer to Abdullah as 'the black bastard.' Every time they came together, we had to turn people away."[15]

Abdullah admits there was animosity between him and Gouldie, but with so many years between them, he has respect for The Stomper. "The way we used to fight, it was real," says Abdullah. "He'd stomp on me and I'd stomp on him and we hit harder and harder. We didn't give a damn. But he's a gentleman and I like Archie. We made a lot of money together."

Bret Hart remembers the matches vividly. "Those were probably the biggest matches Stampede ever had," he says. "That was the fight of the century between those two." Keith Hart agrees. He says having fearsome heels such as Abdullah and Gouldie was the key to Stampede Wrestling's success. "If you don't have that feature attraction, it's like having a monster movie without the monster.... There were times when my dad couldn't get the top heels and you'd watch the business go under. We'd lose so much money. My mom would plead with my dad, 'Stu, let's get out of this business.' He'd say, 'If we can just get the right talent, we'll make money again.' It was a matter of getting guys like The Stomper and Abdullah to come back."

"You're costing me a lot of damn money on this telephone," says Abdullah about ten minutes into our chat. The man is exactly what he says he is, all business, and talking to a writer in Calgary, where he has neither a match nor a restaurant to promote, is of little interest to him. He answers a few questions, sometimes coolly and evasively, sometimes curtly and to the point. Then he cuts the interview short with a message to his fans: "Every so often, get on your hands and knees and pray."

But it's the men who have looked the "Madman from the Sudan" in the eye who provide a real feel of the Abdullah the Butcher experience. Like "Cowboy" Dan Kroffat, who credits Abdullah with spring-boarding his career from rookie status, perpetually doing jobs at the bottom of the cards, to a Stampede Wrestling main-eventer.

"One night Stu sent me in to do a job for Abdullah," Kroffat says. "[Before the match,] Abdullah took me aside and said, 'Kid, tonight we're gonna tear the house down.'" At first, the match went as did so many of Abdullah's matches, with The Butcher destroying his foe. Then, just before he went to drop his devastating flying elbow on Kroffat, he whispered, "Move." As Abdullah launched his elbow, Kroffat rolled out of the way in the nick of time. Abdullah crashed down so hard on the canvas, the building seemed to vibrate. The crowd went wild. Abdullah whispered again, "C'mon, kid. Make your comeback." Kroffat got to his feet, the brutal beating he suffered a mere

moment before completely forgotten, and he laid into Abdullah with a bevy of drop kicks and chops to the chest.

Finally, Abdullah jumped up and fled the ring. "The crowd was ballistic," Kroffat says. "Ed Whalen almost had a hernia announcing it. Stu didn't even know that was coming. Abdullah just decided that was the night he was going to put me over. Stu looked at me and said, 'That bastard made you. You're made from here on in.'"

Abdullah gave a similar boost to former football player Bob Lueck. "I want to work with that kid," The Butcher told Stu. "He's a nice little white boy and we can get a lot of heat."

The first time Lueck was ever called on to blade in the ring, he was to be cut by Abdullah. "It was a tiny cut, but he hit a vein right on my forehead," Lueck says. "I had blood running down my pecs, my thighs. I said, 'Son of a bitch! I'm bleeding to death.' He whispered, 'Keep going, kid. We've got the heat!'"

Not even the Hart boys were safe from The Butcher. Keith Hart remembers being an eighteen-year-old kid selling programs for his father at the Pavilion. "I happened to stroll by Abdullah when he was getting into the ring," Keith says. "He grabbed me by the hair, put his arm around my throat, cut me, and started chewing on my forehead. He said to me [whispering], 'Sell it, kid. Sell it.' It wasn't planned at all. I've still got the scar....

"He was the scariest thing."

Chapter nine

Overkill

"Cowboy" Dan Kroffat stood at the top of the teetering eight-foot stepladder in the centre of the Victoria Pavilion wrestling ring. Six feet tall, Kroffat strained to reach the Cellophane bag full of money, $1,000 hanging from the lights by a string.

The cool grand was just within his grasp when the ladder began to rock dangerously. The Japanese warlord Tor Kamata, a man built like a sumo wrestler, was tipping it over. Kroffat braced himself for a rude crash to the canvas that might break his neck. Some in the capacity crowd of two thousand held their breath, fearing the worst for their hero; others screamed as if they were going down with him.

It was September 1972 and those present were witness to the world's first ladder match. One of the most enduring and popular gimmicks in the wrestling business, the match typically involves a title belt or a bag of money suspended from the ceiling, which combatants compete for. The first one to snatch the prize wins. The objective is to beat one's opponent until he's lying in a broken heap, unable to create problems for the man climbing the ladder. As such battles ensue, wrestlers take nasty lumps, flying several feet in the air, crashing inside and outside the ring, sometimes onto the cement surrounding the ring, other times through ringside tables. Often the ladder itself becomes a weapon, the wrestlers using it as a battering ram on one another or snapping it shut on each others' limbs or heads.

Bret Hart, having begun wrestling for his father in 1978, had great

Tor Kamata comes over the ropes with a big karate chop on a bloodied Abdullah the Butcher, early 1970s.

success with ladder matches. Some of most riveting battles of his early career were fought atop ladders with Dynamite Kid and Bad News Allen. He liked the match so much that he introduced the idea to the WWF in the 1990s, where it became a huge attraction for wrestling fans the world over.

The original Stampede ladder match, invented by Dan Kroffat, was more than just a shock tactic. It was the pinnacle of a feud between Kroffat and Kamata that had been artfully orchestrated, built up week after week until it culminated in this epic confrontation like nothing the fans had ever seen before, held high above the ring.

"Tor kept running out of the ring on me," Kroffat says, sitting in the office of the successful Calgary car dealership he owns. "We were against each other in a bunch of matches.... He'd beat the shit out of me. Then, when I'd make my big comeback, he'd run away.... To get him to stay, I had to create a match where the fans believed he would want to stay. So I hung that bag of money over the ring, and it was his greed that made him stay. In order to get the money, he'd have to beat me down, climb that ladder, and pluck the bag."

Despite his fall from the ladder, Kroffat, then twenty-seven, the all-Canadian babyface, kept fighting. Kamata threw salt in Kroffat's eyes and cold-cocked him. His opponent down, Kamata struggled, huffing and puffing, to pull his 300-pound frame up the ladder. Then Kroffat rose and drop kicked the ladder. Kamata tumbled down like the fairytale giant from the beanstalk. Eventually, the two warriors met on top of the ladder, where they brawled furiously. In the end, good overcame evil. The Japanese warlord lay on the canvas defeated, while Kroffat jumped for joy, throwing $20 and $100 bills into the ecstatic crowd. The match was such a hit that Kamata and Kroffat took it around the circuit. Instead of money, they eventually hung the North American title from the ceiling, with the winner walking away the champion.

Kroffat had emerged as Stampede Wrestling's pre-eminent babyface in the early 1970s. He was beach-blond and hairy chested, with the natural, he-man build of an old-time movie hero. He wasn't packing sculpted bodybuilder muscle but, rather, a solid, working-man's frame. He was a handsome fellow, too, and the warm smile he had for the kids in the audience won everybody's heart. Kroffat's personality – bright, charismatic, upbeat – sealed the deal. The fans in Stampede country loved the guy.

But Stu had more than just a superb babyface with Kroffat. He also had an excellent ideas man, and he gave the young wrestler booking duties. "I did well early in my career because I went to Stu and proposed to him that the business was about building ideas, like ladder matches," Kroffat says. "The

big attraction for me was creating and selling personalities, building concepts, telling stories with the wrestling."

One of Kroffat's most inspired, elaborate angles involved Archie Gouldie, in 1973. Having returned to the territory after a several-month hiatus, The Stomper was mowing men down week after week, leading up to his inevitable collision with Kroffat. The week the two were to tussle, Kroffat was doing a pre-match interview in the ring with Ed Whalen when he was blindsided by Gouldie.

"I was wearing a nice suit and he tore it off, leaving me almost naked in the ring," Kroffat says, his eyes lighting up at the memory. "Then he gave me three of those big stomps to the head and my legs were twitching the whole time. On the final stomp, the twitching stopped. I wanted the crowd to think he'd almost killed me."

Kroffat was carried away on a stretcher. In the weeks that followed, Whalen told the crowd, with deep regret in his voice, that the cowboy's career was ended by the attack, that he was now slowly recovering in a Vancouver hospital. This made The Stomper look more ghoulish than ever as he boasted, "I'm bringing careers to an end!"

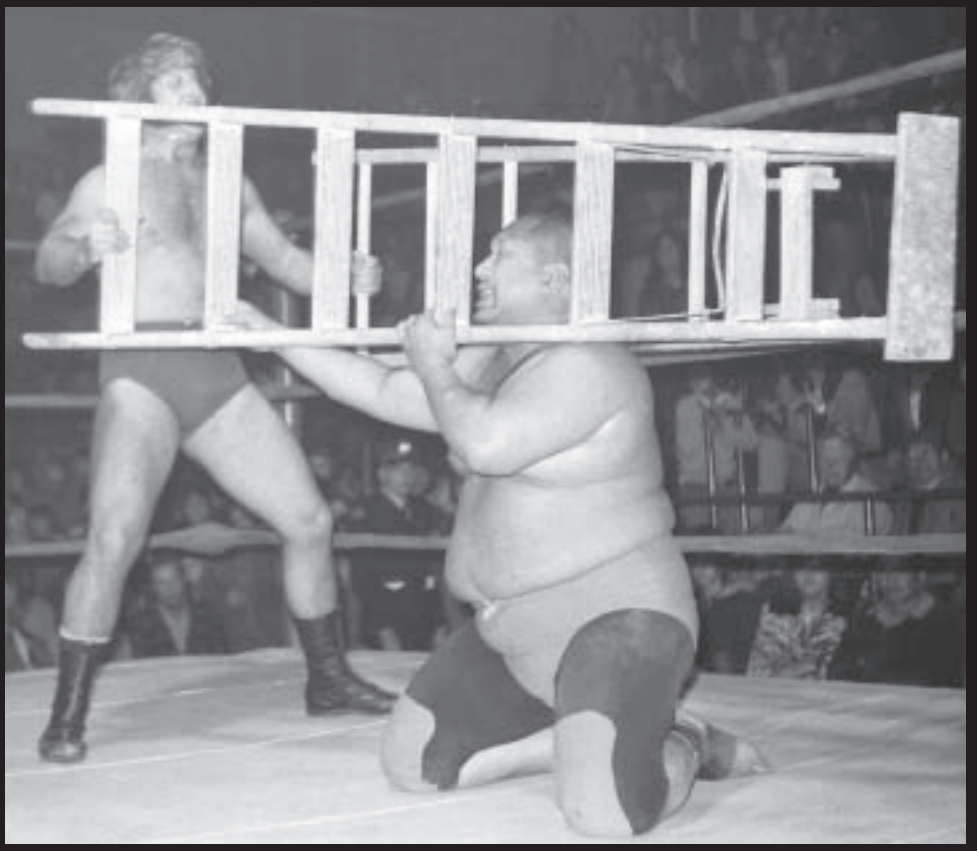
About a month later, Stu announced to the audience that the masked wrestler The Destroyer, who had a strong run in the territory in the 1960s, was returning to Stampede Wrestling to take out Gouldie. On the night of his debut, The Destroyer came to the ring for an interview with Whalen. "So you're in town to take on Archie Gouldie?" Whalen asked. "What are your chances?" The masked man said nothing. A bizarre two-minute silence ensued, the wrestler glaring at the camera menacingly. Finally, Whalen made a crack about that being a record for the least dialogue exchanged in any interview.

Later that evening, Gouldie and The Destroyer squared off, the masked man launching into The Stomper with a fury the villain was unprepared for. Stepping on Archie's throat, The Destroyer again glared into the camera and peeled off his mask, revealing himself to be none other than Dan Kroffat. The crowd roared with glee. So did Whalen, who was as shocked by the turn of events as anyone. The Stomper reacted as if an electric jolt had been sent through his body. No matter how mighty a bad guy might be, an unwritten rule for heels decrees that they are all cowards ultimately, masters of the cheap shot, all too willing to beg for mercy in a pinch. As such, Archie jumped to his feet and fled in terror. The stage was set for a series of sold-out matches between the two men in the Corral.

"I saw the business as entertainment," says Kroffat. "We were acting.... I

Top: Dan Kroffat developed into an exciting and explosive talent early in his career. One of his best weapons was a sky-high dropkick, like this one launched against Gil Hayes, early 1970s.

Bottom: "Cowboy" Dan Kroffat and Tor Kamata do battle in the world's first ladder match, Calgary, September 1972.



picked villains I could tell a story with, guys who would cooperate. I'd say, 'If you go along with me, we'll build up [a feud] for four or five weeks. It will be massive. You'll be a bigger heel than ever.'"

Kroffat certainly upped Kamata's value in Stampede Wrestling. Tor Kamata, born Ronald Kamaka in Hawaii, had been brought to the territory in 1971 by Stu, who was looking for another monster heel to put into the rotation. Gouldie and Abdullah were in demand worldwide and would stay in the territory for only a few months at a time.

Kamata had been working the pro circuit since the mid-1960s and had established himself as a hated villain in the southern states by billing himself as Japanese, capitalizing on the hatred that lingered in America from Pearl Harbor. In some arenas, the promoters had to sneak him in and out of the building for the matches. "I would've been killed," Kamata says. "In one city, somebody told the promoter, 'You bring that dirty, no-good Jap here, we're going to destroy the arena.'"

Kamata had a solid fighting background, having studied martial arts as a boy. He trained as an amateur wrestler in 1959 while in the air force. Later, he worked as a bouncer in a Honolulu restaurant frequented by professional wrestlers. They persuaded him to try his hand at the business. Kamaka was dubbed Tor Kamata, after Tomás de Torquemada, the grand inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition.

Kamata hit Calgary in a suitably grisly fashion, thrown into a wild feud with Abdullah the Butcher. The pictures of the two behemoths at war, blood streaming down their anguished faces, speaks to the intensity of their clashes. For a time, Kamata was pushed as a top heel, but after a botched angle, he fell out of favour with Stu.

In the summer of 1972, world champion Dory Funk Jr. was headed to the territory for the Calgary Stampede, where Stu wanted him to face Kamata. In the week leading up to the match, Kamata was to fight Les Thornton and win, thus making him the number one contender for Funk's title. Instead, Kamata and Thornton wound up brawling outside the ring, where the referee had no choice but to count them out. Stu saw this as a disaster. There should have been a decisive winner in place to meet the champ. "Tor hadn't followed orders, and he let himself be manipulated by Thornton," says Ross Hart. "Stu was pissed."

Tor had lost his position and was gradually moving down the card. He would have been on his way out of the promotion if Kroffat hadn't chosen him for the ladder match. It resurrected Kamata's career in Stampede Wrestling.

Although he cut an ugly figure, Kamata was never as fierce as Abdullah

or The Stomper. "He wasn't frightening enough," says Keith Hart. "He was more like a big Buddha. People sort of liked him." Because he had this light side, Kamata clicked with Ed Whalen, and his most entertaining Stampede feud was with the beloved announcer.

A devilish grin spreads across Kamata's face when he remembers the good old days with Whalen. "I gave him a bad time every week," Kamata says, now sixty-eight. "I'd run down the way he dressed.... It got to the point where people just wanted to listen to Ed and me." The rapport between the two men was comedic. Tor fancied himself a classy champion in his beautiful suits, alligator shoes, and diamond rings, and he flattered Whalen with promises of Geisha girls and fine silk suits from the Orient. Whalen inevitably scoffed at Kamata and chastised him for his cheating ways. Kamata denied all with a taunting, fiendish smile: "No-o-o-o-o chancee, Mr. Whalen!" The phrase also came in handy when Kamata trash-talked his opponents. "Everybody had no-o-o-o-o chancee when they'd wrestle me!" he says. This became such a popular phrase that in the early 1970s the Harts were selling T-shirts and pins with it printed on them.

Like Abdullah, Tor had success in the restaurant business, opening up the popular Calgary eatery Tor's Teriyaki. "I had a booth open at the Stampede matches, too," Kamata says. "My teriyaki sauce was so great, we were selling it by the gallon." Alas, it all ended in 1975 when Kamata and his wife split up. Kamata took his show on the road, finally retiring from the wrestling business in 1987 to open a restaurant and a shiatsu business in Saskatoon. He returned to Calgary in 2002.

It has been thirty years since Tor Kamata was a household name in Calgary, but it seems every other week he is approached on the street or in the supermarket by somebody pointing and grinning ear to ear. Kamata always knows what he's about to hear. "No-o-o-o-o chancee!"

Life in the asylum that was Hart House was never boring. Some years, however, were more tumultuous than others. The 1970s was a particularly wild time. The Hart kids were coming of age and making their first forays into the family business. Stu's brats, as some of the wrestlers viewed them, were going to make their presence felt in the territory for better or for worse, no matter who liked it. Including their old man.

It was also a time of major shifts in the Stampede Wrestling universe. On one level, things were just as nutty as they had always been. Alison Hart remembers walking into the kitchen and having Japanese wrestlers bow down to her. Then, she would step into her backyard – where Stu had

added an outdoor wrestling ring for summer training – and watch sweaty behemoths screaming, torturing one another. She recalls her father being called to the old Regis Hotel one afternoon because a midget wrestler was drunk and doing handstands on the roof.

It was at the 1972 Calgary Stampede that her father fought a 600-pound tiger. Before putting the tiger on his TV show, Stu wanted to get to know it, to see if man and beast could click. Was the beast game for a wrestling match? "At first, the tiger had a real bad attitude," Alison says. "It lifted its leg and pissed all over the wall." But once Stu began playing with the big jungle cat, a bond was established. The Hart patriarch and the tiger wrestled to a draw on the July 1972 wrestling program, although even Stu would have been helpless had the big cat decided to get mean. Were the Hart kids ever frightened that their father might be mauled? "No," says Alison flatly. "We all sort of thought of him as Superman. We knew he'd be all right."

But as the business progressed, attracting a new generation of fans, Stu began to lose some of his oldest, most trusted colleagues. His best friend Luther Lindsey died of a heart attack in 1971. Stu's buddy, Jesse Ortega, The Mighty Ursus, who had wrestled for him since the early 1950s, also checked out in the '70s, dying of cancer in the later part of that decade.

Another tragedy of the era befell a new man, thirty-one-year-old Japanese grappler Yukihiro Sakeda, who wrestled as Tokyo Joe. On March 18, 1974, Joe and the boys were driving from a match in High River, Alberta, when they hit a patch of ice and spun into a ditch. A tow truck came to the rescue and Joe was aiding the driver when another vehicle spun out of control. Joe's legs were pinned between two vehicles. A tourniquet was tied to the wrestler's mangled leg Joe was rushed to the hospital. But nothing could be done. His right leg was amputated four inches above the knee. Joe stayed in Calgary where he remains to this day, training young wrestlers and recruiting them for the New Japan wrestling promotion in Tokyo.

Without a doubt, the most significant loss of the era came as the result of a road fight. The man downed was "Hanna pig farmer" Dave Ruhl, Stu's right-hand man almost from the start. The real story behind Ruhl's end has been blurred by the passage of time and endless trips around the rumour mill. It's certain that some sort of dispute between Ruhl and Carlos Colon turned violent on a road trip sometime around October 1972, as the wrestlers made the trek from Medicine Hat to Saskatoon. Ruhl, fifty-two, was behind the wheel of his Cadillac. Dan Kroffat was in the passenger's seat and Colon, twenty-seven, then wrestling under the name Carlos Belafonte, was in the backseat with his tag team partner Gino Caruso. Colon, a suave Puerto Rican

who would go on to be a superstar wrestler and promoter in his homeland, was feeling ill.

As Kroffat remembers it, it was a cold, frosty night and Ruhl was puffing on a cigar. Colon was nauseated by the oppressive smoke that filled the car. He rolled down the window to get fresh air.

"Close the window, it's cold out," Ruhl growled.

"Then put the cigar out," Colon snapped. "I've got a headache."

"It's my car, and I'll do whatever the hell I want."

The exchange got increasingly ugly, insults and challenges being spat back and forth. Finally, Ruhl pulled the car over to the side of the road to settle the score. The two squared off, dancing around one another like boxers, each man waiting for an opening.

Ruhl always insisted he was never hit. Kroffat says Colon caught the older man with a hard slap to the side of his head. Whatever happened, Ruhl lost his footing on a patch of ice and fell backwards, cracking his head hard on the cement. "It clunked like a coconut," Kroffat says. "It knocked him right out." At that moment, another car full of wrestlers pulled up. Carlos and his partner got in with them and carried on toward Saskatoon. Kroffat dragged Ruhl's limp body over to his Caddie and laid the booker on the backseat, then also continued on to Saskatoon.

"I could hear him groaning in the back, and I wanted to take him to the hospital," Kroffat says. "By the time we got to Saskatoon, at the Executive Hotel, he was coherent but groggy." Kroffat asked Ruhl if he needed to go to the hospital. The older man was adamant that he did not, that he only needed a good night's sleep.

Keith Hart got a good look at Ruhl the next day. At the time, Keith was taking pre-law courses at the University of Saskatchewan and, to earn a bit of money, worked as a referee once a week when Stampede Wrestling came to the Saskatoon Arena. Keith had been to the arena earlier in the day and was surprised Ruhl was not there. Puzzled, Keith went to the hotel and found Ruhl unconscious in his room, lying in bed with blood on his pillow. At the hospital, he was diagnosed with a serious concussion.

Word among the wrestlers was that the fight between Ruhl and Colon had little to do with a rolled-down window. Instead, it was about a woman. As the story goes, after Sweet Daddy Siki left the territory, Ruhl moved in on the big-haired, long-legged professor's daughter his ring nemesis had been dating. After that, Ruhl's double life of wrestler and farmer became more divided than ever. On one hand was the salt-of-the-earth family man; on the other hand, the high-roller wrestling star squiring the young sexpot. "She

rolled around with him to all the towns," says Keith. Perhaps Ruhl was going through a mid-life crisis. The girl, the flashy car, conflicts with the younger stars; he even took to dying his hair jet black. "It looked like he was using shoe polish," says Helen Hart's brother-in-law Jock Osler. "When he'd sweat, the die ran."

Allegedly, Ruhl's ego took a hit when his girlfriend got friendly with Colon on one of the road trips. Ruhl was infuriated that this young stud had moved in on his territory. By the time the two men stepped into the car together, on the night of the fight, there was already plenty of tension between them.

The consensus is that the head injury Dave Ruhl sustained ended his career. He attempted a comeback, but he was never the same man. His equilibrium was off. He could no longer maintain his balance when performing the standard wrestling stunts. The boisterous ring persona he adopted, the confidence he once exuded, that too was gone. He seemed subdued. Beaten.

Many of the wrestlers felt that Ruhl got what he deserved, that his power in the territory corrupted him and he needed to be knocked off his pedestal. But there was another camp that was sad to see him go. "I loved Dave," says wrestler Leo Burke, of New Brunswick's famed Cormier family. "When I came here, it was the first time I had been anywhere, and Dave was like a father to me. He really took me under his wing." Keith adds: "Most wrestlers by their very nature are in the business because they're individuals. They don't like the office. It doesn't matter how good the boss is, everybody turns on the man in charge."

Dave Ruhl's son, Glenn, defends his father's honour. He maintains his parents were happily married for forty-eight years. He denounces the story about Colon and his father fighting over a wrestling siren as "crap." He also disputes the notion that Dave's career was ended by his head injury. He says his father wrestled his last match in Japan that same year but was unable to finish his contract because of a kidney stone. Nevertheless, between the concussion and the other physical problems he faced, Ruhl had no choice but to hang up his wrestling boots. Ruhl held the Canadian Heavyweight title when he had his accident, and Stu decided to retire the belt along with the man. It was the symbol of an era gone by.

Ruhl did not find it easy adjusting to life outside the business. "It was ironic because when the accident happened … he wasn't planning on wrestling that much longer," Glenn says. "But like most performers, he wanted to quit on his own terms. When he was forced to quit, that was problematic.… It gave him a lot of depression and witnessing that was really tough on my mother and me."

The same injuries that kept Dave out of the ring made farm work difficult. With neither farming nor wrestling putting food on the table, life became a struggle. "There's no pension plan in wrestling," says Glenn. "There's nothing to fall back on.... It was one thing for my dad to sell the farm on his own terms, but another thing to do it so [he and my mom] could live. It allowed them to have some quality of life. It would've been bad if he just had the wrestling."

Dave Ruhl died in 1988 at the age of sixty-eight. His funeral was held in Medicine Hat on a beastly cold December day. Highway reports deemed the three-and-a-half-hour trek from Calgary to Medicine Hat unsafe. "It took a brave soul to travel that day," says Glenn. Regardless, Stu Hart showed up, by himself, to say goodbye to his old friend and fellow road warrior. Another tie to his glorious past had been severed.

When Dave Ruhl walked away, an opening was left on the roster that Stu needed to fill. His third oldest son, Keith, then in his early twenties, stepped up to take the spot. Keith enjoyed wrestling but was not obsessed with it as some of his brothers would be. He got into the game mostly to help out his father.

Bruce Hart also became involved, and although he says wrestling was not his ambition at first, he soon became determined to one day fill his dad's shoes as head of the Hart empire.

Then there was Smith. Because he was the oldest, it is natural to assume he was the first to be considered for the top spot as Stu's heir. But from almost all accounts, Smith had been irresponsible from day one. He never seemed to take anything seriously – certainly not university – and Stu and Helen worried about him. What was to become of the kid? Stu and Helen had always said they would never turn the business over to anybody who didn't have a post-secondary education. They began bending their rule for Smith, as they would eventually bend all their rules for him. Maybe the wrestling game would motivate Smith, give him something to focus on. But too many times he would mess up when given a chance to work in the business.

Japanese wrestler Mr. Hito, a Stampede Wrestling mainstay in the 1970s and '80s, remembers Smith being in charge of one show in a small town in British Columbia. The gig was sold-out, and Hito, who was promised a percentage of the gate, expected a good payday. When Stu handed him a $100 bill, Hito, expecting a lot more, reacted angrily. Smith had told Stu the show was poorly attended and Stu had paid the boys accordingly. Hito says the incident led to Stu giving his eldest son a good stretching, making him scream. Smith, however, denies that such a scene ever took place.

But from the family's point of view, it soon became apparent that Smith was not responsible when it came to business matters. "He was neutered early on," says Bret Hart, "turned into a toothless hound. He never had much say in anything."

Smith, on the other hand, says he was an important player in the promotion at various times throughout the 1970s and '80s. He says he was his father's "troubleshooter" and, when he worked as a booker, he was a "match-making genius. Anything I did worked out well."

However, Keith, along with Bruce, did make an impact on the promotion. While a fine athlete, practical Keith was the least flashy of the Hart brothers in the ring – certainly not the showman his brothers turned out to be. His style was rooted in traditional wrestling, full of technical moves and submission holds. By today's standards – the average match moving at a speed metal pace – Keith's matches would be considered dull. Still, he was a good-looking, likable babyface, a straight arrow with a strong work ethic, and a solid moral centre, and the crowds got behind him.

"I wasn't the most flamboyant," Keith admits, "but nobody could see through my matches and that was the most important thing to my dad. He told me of all the boys, my matches were the most realistic, and I thought that was a compliment of the highest order. He was my boss, I respected everything about him, and I wrestled for him more than for the crowd."

When Keith had a good angle to work, he worked it well, as in the battle royal of 1977. In a typical battle royal, fifteen or so wrestlers climb into the ring at once and do battle in an every-man-for-himself war, seeking to eliminate the other wrestlers by tossing them from the ring. The last man in the ring is declared the winner. The twist in this battle royal was that a rope hung from the ceiling. At the top of it was the key to a Pontiac Trans Am Firebird. The first man to climb the rope won the match and the car. To do so, one had to eliminate or disable the competition. The match made for some daring high spots – a wrestler might pull himself twelve feet above the ring while another grappler grabbed hold of the rope, whipping it around until his nemesis came crashing down.

In the 1977 match, Keith climbed the rope as planned and plucked the keys as the sold-out Pavilion crowd went wild. It was a dandy of an angle as far as Keith was concerned. The car really was his for the keeping. Being a Hart kid on the Stampede Wrestling show had its benefits.

While Keith was a handsome jock, Bruce was more of a pretty boy. It's hard to imagine today, when his face has taken on such a scowl-bitten, world-weary look, but in his twenties, Bruce could have been mistaken for a

member of a pop boy band. With his blue eyes, earnest smile, and soft blond curls, which he grew conservatively long, Bruce looked like the kind of boy mothers would want their daughters to bring home. At five-foot-nine and less than 200 pounds, he was dwarfed by the men he met in the ring, and this gave him an underdog status that he milked expertly. When he took a beating, he elicited sympathy from the crowd, selling every blow as though he were a suffering Tiny Tim. When he struck back, it was like wee David toppling Goliath.

In those baffling moments of pro wrestling injustice, when the bad guys boldly cheat – and everybody in the arena and in TV land sees it, but somehow the referee does not – Bruce embodied the fans' frustration, jumping and shouting, pointing and punching the ropes, and scratching his head so hard it looked as though he would tear his hair out. Bruce was actually being true to himself, according to Keith, who says his brother was spoiled, accustomed to throwing such temper tantrums in the house when he didn't get his way.

By the mid-'70s, Bruce and Keith were wrestling and taking on booking duties. Keith says Stu gave him the lion's share of the booking responsibilities at first. This chafed Bruce, a creative force who was always bursting with ideas for the promotion. But as Stu saw it, Bruce was a practitioner of "cheap heat." Matches he orchestrated were frequently bloody affairs, with heels using objects such as chains or brass knuckles and giving low blows, or "nut shots" as the Harts called them, to anger the fans. Stu believed such antics should be used sparingly, for maximum impact. Using such shock tactics regularly would cheapen the sport in the eyes of the fans – it would become a goon show with no connection to the athletic roots of the sport – and to Stu, that was a travesty. Wrestling, for all its theatrics, should be an athletic exhibition first and foremost, not some circus of depravity.

But perhaps, in the age-old way that a father can be too hard on his son, Stu was not being fair to Bruce. Stu had been letting men like Abdullah the Butcher take the business to unsettling extremes for years, so why then did he expect Bruce to be so squeaky clean? Part of it came down to pressure from the conservative Ed Whalen, who was becoming increasingly queasy with the direction the business was heading. As veteran wrestling journalist David Meltzer puts it, Whalen's idea of pro wrestling was mostly "scientific matches mixed with light-hearted and inoffensive comedy."[1] The extreme stuff was hard enough to take coming from a pro like Abdullah, but Whalen wasn't about to tolerate it from one of Stu's upstart kids.

Keith, on the other hand, was a good boy, playing within his father's guidelines. "Bruce was a genius in a lot of ways," Keith says. "Everybody else,

including me, was just so by the book. I was just trying to please my dad and give him realistic matches. I wasn't thinking outside the box.... But my dad didn't like a lot of Bruce's concepts. To him it was making a mockery of what he considered a true sport.... Maybe [Stu] was a dinosaur in that way. Maybe we should have gone completely farcical."

Either way, Keith says he had his dad's favour in the 1970s and was handed more creative control than Bruce. This is where Bruce – his mother's golden child since she almost lost him in the womb – began going to his mother to influence the business.

As booker, Keith had formed a tight working relationship with Leo Burke and Colorado's Larry Lane, just the sort of grapplers Stu liked: highly capable men in the ring but also straight-shooters who didn't rely on gimmicks. Together they painstakingly developed storylines to enact for the Friday night's TV taping. Then, when the night came, the rug would be pulled out from under their feet. The card had been changed.

"My dad always had the final veto on these things," Keith says. "But Smith and Bruce would be up in the office while I was on the road, and they'd pressure my mom until she'd say, 'Stu, we have to change [plans].' I'd come home and see Smith up there with his big bear feet, his toes wrapped around the edge of my mom's desk, harassing her. I knew [him and Bruce] had been up there all week. Then I'd open the program at the match and the card I put together was different."

Both Bruce and Smith harboured a grudge against Larry Lane because he had called them spoiled brats, Keith says. In retaliation, Bruce and Smith turned their mother against Lane. "That was total bullshit," Keith says. "But my dad might have promised Larry $500, and my mom.... wouldn't want to co-sign the cheque.... [This made my dad] lose respect with the wrestlers.... They'd say, 'What the hell, Stu? You promised me this.'"

"It was like Chinese water torture," Keith says of the way Bruce and Smith worked on their mother all week long to persuade their father to change plans. Because of this, Helen grew to hate Lane, even though she had little contact with him. Keith remembers talking to Lane under a veranda at Hart House. A large flowerpot was perched on the edge of the second-floor balcony. "It must have weighed fifty pounds," Keith says. "It was all [Helen] could do to move it. Well, one day she dumped it.... It landed at [Lane's] feet and he looked up. She said 'I'm sorry, Larry. It slipped.' That's what a rage [Smith and Bruce] had her in."

With the Hart kids on the scene, the territory had become a political minefield.

King Curtis Iaukea and Mark Lewin were brought in to save Stampede Wrestling in 1975. Stu hoped to repeat his success of the late 1960s when Abdullah the Butcher and Archie "The Stomper" Gouldie were brought in to save the lagging business. That era, in which Stu made up to $1 million a year,[2] was beginning to peter out. Gouldie and Abdullah had moved on, and because they could make more money in bigger cities, were returning less frequently.

Stu needed a new monster with the vicious intensity of his former stars. Texas bad boy Terry Funk, who had been in and out of Stampede over the years, recommended King Curtis. The brother of Dory Funk Jr. was beginning to develop a reputation for wild and bloody bouts, and Terry knew Curtis could equal Abdullah for sheer brutality. It was evident by the big man's forehead, which had the same mangled qualities as the Butcher's.

Iaukea, a bloated, bearded Hawaiian with a grimace of death, had been a star heel in Australia in the early 1970s. Working against Lewin, a wild man from Buffalo, New York, the two had a feud that was brimming with blood. The Australian territory flourished, so much so that promoters around the world, Stu included, began looking at Lewin and Iaukea with dollar signs in their eyes. They were the ultimate quick fix for any lagging territory.

But Lewin and King Curtis came with a catch-22 that most promoters ignored. "They'd go from territory to territory all over the world and get it red hot because they'd be doing more blood than any of these places had ever experienced," says wrestling journalist David Meltzer. "At the beginning it would be great, but they'd burn people out [with the non-stop gore] and then they'd move on to the next territory. That was their MO. The Australian territory never really recovered after those guys left."

Not long after the wrestlers arrived, with Lewin given creative control over their angles, Stu recruited another blood merchant, Big Bad John, a scruffy, leather-clad Texan. It was like having three Abdullah the Butchers in town at once. And three Abdullahs is two too many. It was overkill. Also, to Abdullah's credit, there was usually a great deal of ring psychology behind his violence. He bled buckets, but there was a method to his madness. His angles always told a compelling story. Critics of King Curtis and Lewin charged that they were all shock and no story.

"Why do soap operas on TV last for years and years?" asks Dan Kroffat. "They're propelled not through violence but through storytelling. Each week, they leave you with a cliff-hanger to bring you back. You got caught up with the characters.... Guys [like Curtis and Lewin] who told no story but went out and bled like pigs every night, can you bring them back week after

week? Not really. Not for long."

There was a crude attempt at a storyline during the Curtis-Lewin era. Big Bad John was the general of a self-styled army, where the soldiers, who included Iaukea, Mr. Hito, and John Quinn, wore Nazi-style helmets and jackboots. At one point, this villainous army attacked sixty-year-old Stu in the ring, handcuffing him to the ropes and laying into him viciously. Dan Kroffat, Larry Lane, and Mark Lewin came to Stu's rescue, touching off the most graphic feud western Canadian audiences had ever seen.

"They set the promotion on fire at first, but it was far too radical," says Ross Hart. "They were [bleeding] every night, and the interviews were way over the top. King Curtis was talking about ripping people's entrails out.... Calgary had some hardcore stuff with Abdullah and Archie. That's what Stampede Wrestling was known for.... But this was so graphic. There were all these calls to the TV station complaining."

Stu and the offending wrestlers accrued hundreds of dollars in fines from the boxing and wrestling commissions in both Edmonton and Calgary. Stu also received a letter of warning from Calgary mayor Rod Sykes, letting him know that such reprehensible behaviour in the ring would not be tolerated.

Sykes's outrage spoke volumes. As mayor, he opposed the more offensive acts in the game. An article in the *Calgary Sun* on May 12, 1974, finds him expressing outrage at one wrestler who licked his opponent's blood off the canvas. But in the same piece, Sykes praised wrestling for providing "a healthy outlet for pent-up frustrations.... If it weren't for wrestling," Sykes jokes, "many of these women would go home and beat up their husbands." He continued: "In our society, the borders between right and wrong are so blurred that people become confused and alienated. Wrestling has the old-fashioned good-versus-evil theme very clearly defined. It's a healthy change."[3]

With the coming of Lewin and King Curtis, Sykes stopped defending wrestling and threatened to revoke Stu's licence to hold matches. Stu protested, and the matter was taken to City Hall in August 1975.[4]

Ed Whalen also took a stand against the direction the show was taking, and his complaints brought about terrible consequences for the promotion. After one particularly violent program in March 1975, the beloved announcer appeared on the six o'clock news denouncing the violence and threatening to leave the show if it did not stop. Whalen thought Stampede Wrestling should be good, clean, family entertainment. "He was not going to play blood, period," says Whalen's wife, Nomi. "He knew there

were a lot of kids watching that show, and he cared about what was being taught.... He didn't believe in portraying violence in front of young people. It wasn't okay."

When it came to Whalen, Stu had a dilemma. Of course, Whalen was an extremely popular figure who gave the show its personality – his personality. Stu felt Stampede Wrestling couldn't continue without Whalen. Yet, the announcer often turned up his nose at the business, and he didn't have the stomach for its inherent violence.

Whalen also expressed concern that being associated with such a show would damage his credibility as the CFAC news director.[5] This created problems for Stampede Wrestling. David Meltzer summed up the situation best: "In pro wrestling, it is inherent that at some point you are going to have to check your dignity at the door. Whalen, because he had power due to his standing with the television station, had frequent moral objections to pro wrestling. Whenever there was a battle between Whalen's dignity and pro wrestling, it was never a contest."[6]

This time, however, Whalen's stand was vindicated because, ultimately, Lewin and Curtis were toxic for business. After an initial boost at the gates, people began to react negatively to the excessive violence, perhaps spurred on by Whalen's denunciation of it. By the end of Lewin and Iaukea's eight-month stay, attendance at the shows had dropped considerably. When the violence merchants left town, "they left us nothing but scorched earth," says Keith Hart. "Whalen was disgusted with us, and we had lost a lot of goodwill in the community."

Although the show was cleaned up, the bad taste in his mouth remained, and before the year was out, Whalen phased himself off it. Brian Dance, who worked CFAC's sports department, took over the announcer's role, but he was never an adequate replacement. "He just didn't have Ed's charisma," Ross says.

After the excess of 1975, Stu steered his ship away from the bloody waters that had gotten him in such trouble. For a time, he overcompensated for his past transgressions. A February 2, 1977, *Calgary Herald* piece titled "Wrestlers Turn Cheers to Snores" featured Rabbi Louis Ginsberg of the boxing and wrestling commission complaining, "The pendulum has swung the other way." Ginsberg claimed that the wrestling matches had become so tame that they were "putting the crowd to sleep."[7]

Just like that, the promotion was in its worst slump since the early 1960s. The Stomper, Abdullah, and Tor Kamata were gone. Dan Kroffat was beginning to move away from the wrestling business. With a dying promotion,

Stu once again had trouble bringing in the top talents.

One of Stampede's top stars in 1976 was Ripper Collins, from Hawaii. While he did have a distinct flair, with his bleach-blond hair, effeminate voice, and crowd-baiting skills, Collins was grotesque. Not in the dangerous way Abdullah was grotesque but in a pathetic way, with his small arms and grossly swollen belly. Collins's ring skills were poor, too. His crowning finishing move was a lousy knee to the groin.

Even though Collins was married to a former woman wrestler, Barbara Baker, his homosexuality was well known in the wrestling community. This wouldn't have mattered had Collins been discreet. According to Ross, Collins got in trouble with the law when he picked up a hitchhiker one night driving home from a gig in Dawson Creek, British Columbia. The young man wound up fleeing from the van with his clothes torn, scratches and bite marks covering his body. When he was picked up by the RCMP, he told them that Collins had tried to sexually assault him. Collins was arrested, and Stu's van was impounded as evidence.

Collins, free on bail, claimed innocence, saying the young man had attacked him. Stu was leery but kept the wrestler on the payroll for a while, awaiting the trial. He fired Collins not long afterward when the wrestler made profane gestures to a male fan. Collins left Calgary before his case went to court, Ross says. According to wrestling journalist Meltzer, Collins died of AIDS sometime in the 1990s.

Things were looking dismal for Stampede Wrestling. Not even the return of Ed Whalen in 1977 was sufficient to give business a boost. Stu seriously considered selling the promotion that year, getting out of the roller coaster of a business for good. He spoke of retirement, about spending his twilight years travelling with Helen, in peace. She wholeheartedly encouraged the idea.

For years, Stu had been fending off advances from Ray and Bud Osborne, who wanted to start their own wrestling promotion in Alberta, to run as direct competition to Stampede Wrestling. The Osborne brothers had run shows in rural areas across the Prairie provinces for years and had applied to both the Calgary and Edmonton boxing and wrestling commissions for licences to hold shows in those cities. As Stu saw it, he had been good to the Osbornes throughout their careers. Now they wanted to run against him? It was a stab in the back. "Hey, it's a free country," says Bud Osborne today, defending his ambitions.

Each time the Osbornes made a move into his Calgary stronghold, Stu managed to block them. The commission received letters from the likes of

Archie Gouldie and Little Beaver, siding with Stu and stating they would not work for a rival promotion. Stu himself wrote letters of protest. "Wherever there are two wrestling factions battling each other in the same area, they not only kill each other off, but they kill the sport for the fans and all those involved," he wrote to the Calgary commission on April 13, 1976.

But as business continued to plummet, Stu began to wonder what the hell he was fighting for. After negotiating with the Osbornes, plans were made for Stu to close up shop at the end of the 1977 Calgary Stampede, at which time the Osbornes would launch their promotion. Long involved in real estate, the Osbornes put up land as a non-refundable deposit.[8] It looked like a done deal. Stampede Wrestling was finished.

Chapter ten

The Age of Dynamite

When he first laid eyes on Dynamite Kid, Bruce Hart had a revelation. The blond Hart boy, disenchanted that the family business was going down the tubes, had signed on with England's Joint Promotions in 1977 for a six-week tour of the United Kingdom as "Bronco" Bruce Hart, a Stetson- and chaps-wearing cowboy. He was wrestling in the northwestern English town of Chester at a beer-soaked community hall when he saw the eighteen-year-old Tommy "Dynamite Kid" Billington fly into action.

Bruce had been around the world's greatest wrestlers all his life, but he had never seen anybody move like this kid. Dynamite was unbelievably fast, flying around the ring like a ping-pong ball, and, damn, he hit hard. He stung those fat bastards he was up against before they knew what hit them. As his ring name suggested, Dynamite was explosive, with an innate sense of timing. His wrestling skills were technically sound, too.

The thing that most excited Bruce was Dynamite Kid's size. In the five years he had been wrestling, Bruce had taken his share of derogatory cracks about his stature. Bud Osborne, who was about to buy his dad's business, was an early detractor. "He was too small," says Bud to this day. "Just a little tit. He was a conceited little bastard too, and he knew you couldn't hurt him [because of Stu]. If it hadn't been for his dad, he never would've stepped inside a ring."

Dynamite Kid was the man who was going to make those sons of bitches

A scrawny Tom "Dynamite Kid" Billington at about age 16 with his trainer, Ted Betley, circa 1975.

eat their words, Bruce thought. This scrawny kid was even smaller than he was. Dynamite was five-foot-eight and about 155 pounds, and yet he hit the ring like a tornado. The giants could not squash him.

Dynamite also had a good head on his shoulders for the business. Despite his awesome skills, he wasn't out there to glorify himself. He made his opponents look like a million bucks every night. They could give the kid a love tap and he'd fly across the ring as if struck by the hand of God. Wrestling Dynamite, grapplers would later say, was like playing with a balloon. It was the ultimate compliment.

Here was somebody Bruce's size who he could team up with, or feud with, and they would both come out stars. Dynamite Kid was going to save Stampede Wrestling and catapult the lagging promotion into the stratosphere. Dynamite Kid was the future.

After the night's match, Bronco Bruce approached Dynamite. At first, the lad was not friendly. Billington was a shy, defensive kid, with a scowl for strangers. He often had a cold, emotionless look in his eyes, like a shark. But he warmed up when Bruce began talking business. Dynamite claims Bruce offered him an all-expenses-paid trip to Canada to wrestle in Stu Hart's promotion, as well as a free car, an apartment, and $400 a week. Compared with where Billington came from, it sounded like paradise.

Dynamite Kid came from the bleak coal mining town of Golborne, near Wigan, between working-class Manchester and Liverpool, in northern England. "When I went there, I found it very depressing," says Dynamite Kid's ex-wife, Michelle Billington. "There was not much to do other than hard labour. You could aspire to make factory parts for appliances. I remember there was a toilet roll factory in the neighbourhood.... Tom was actually born in the room we stayed in. There was no heat. Just a little gas fireplace downstairs.... Later on, when Tom made money, he helped his dad fix the place up, but his dad was always so proud. [He'd say,] 'I don't need no central heating!'"

Bret Hart suggests Dynamite Kid's lineage can be traced back to a family of executioners who hung criminals in England around the turn of the nineteenth century. Historical records confirm there was such a Billington family, though it's not clear whether they're Dynamite's ancestors. What is clear is that Dynamite came by his hardened, two-fisted nature naturally. His grandfather, who lived a block from his grandson, was a bare-knuckles boxer and a bully. "Everybody feared him," says Michelle. "Nobody was even allowed to walk on the sidewalk in front of his house. He would come out and ... he was just ferocious." Dynamite's father, Billy, also boxed in his younger days, as did Dynamite's uncle, Eric, who was a ranked pro. Dynamite's father

Top left: The man who would change wrestling: Dynamite Kid as a little boy. Top right: A young and tough Dynamite Kid wears a fur jacket in Japan, early 1980s. "This was his favourite picture," says his ex-wife Michelle Billington. "He thought he looked like Marlon Brando." Bottom: Dynamite Kid (left) with his tag team partner Luke "Loch Ness Monster" McMasters (right). Evil manager J.R. Foley is in the middle. Dynamite's speed and McMasters' power led to the two winning the Stampede International Tag Team belts in 1980.

dreamed that his son would be a boxer and began training him when he was a little boy.

Billy was a harsh man. "If I did something wrong and he caught me, he'd crack me one straight in the face," writes Dynamite in his autobiography, *Pure Dynamite*. "No warning, he just did it. He broke my nose once."[1] But Dynamite never resented his father. Rather, he respected Billy and considered him a friend. Dynamite Kid's world was a world of hard-fighting men. That's all he knew. Even his autobiography is virtually female-free: his mother, two sisters, and even his two wives and daughters all get short shrift.

Dynamite had a mean streak and a wicked sense of humour that would manifest itself years later with the sadistic ribs he played on his fellow wrestlers. He gleefully recalls finding a doll his parents meant to give his sister for Christmas and painting it blue, ruining it.

Little Tommy hated school. He didn't like to read and was constantly in fights, which got him caned three or four times a week. The one class he did excel in was gym. He was a killer on the soccer and rugby fields. He was a natural gymnast, too, able to work the rings like an Olympic athlete. His coaches were convinced he could conquer any sport he chose. Billington's passion was wrestling.

Dynamite's mentor was the English wrestler Ted Betley, who fought in a mask and black cloak as Doctor Death. Retired, Betley was training young wrestlers when he met thirteen-year-old Tom Billington. Dynamite trained with Betley six days a week for the next three years. For part of his training, Betley took him to Riley's Gym, Wigan's version of the Hart's Dungeon, with its own fear-inspiring nickname, The Snake Pit. The Snake Pit had spawned such British wrestling legends as Billy Robinson and Karl Gotch. Like so many before him, Billington was inducted into the torturous world of submission wrestling. He was squeezed in leg locks until he screamed, thinking his legs would tear apart at the knee. But like Stu Hart, Dynamite was one of the boys who hung on, who kept coming back week after week.

At age fourteen, Billington dropped out of school, and at sixteen, christened Dynamite Kid by Betley, he began wrestling professionally. By the time he was eighteen, Dynamite held both the British Lightweight and European Welterweight titles. Still, he was not making what he was worth, promoter Max Crabtree paying him only twelve pounds a night. It's no wonder Bruce Hart's offer seemed so appealing. At first, though, Crabtree persuaded Dynamite to turn down Bruce's offer. If Dynamite left England, he would have to drop the belts he was so proud of. Crabtree also promised him a raise. That turned out to be one extra pound per match.

And on Bruce's end, too, there were impediments. Try as he might, he could not get his father excited about Dynamite. "Stu had a real obsession with size," Bruce says. "If you were under 240, he thought you were too small."

But the arrival of Dynamite was destined. In Alberta, the real estate market had collapsed, and the Osbornes were unable to buy Stu's territory. Meanwhile, Dynamite decided he didn't need Crabtree. Betley phoned Hart House and, talking to somebody he thought was Stu – though Billington insists it was one of the Hart boys pretending to be his dad – he scheduled Dynamite's Calgary trip.

Dynamite's cousin, Davey Boy Smith, four years his junior, came to watch The Kid's last wrestling match before leaving for Canada. Davey Boy worshiped his cousin. He was already following in Dynamite's footsteps, training hard with Betley. On April 27, 1978, nineteen-year-old Tommy Billington flew to Calgary with twenty pounds sterling in his pocket.[2]

"Ehh, you're a skinny little bastard," said Stu Hart the first time he laid eyes on Dynamite Kid at the Victoria Pavilion, prodding him like a disappointing cut of steak. The remark made Dynamite boil inside, but he managed to keep his cool. He was there to do business, and besides, he was about to show this Stu Hart what a skinny little bastard could do.

Dynamite fought his first Stampede match that night against Angel Acevedo, who wrestled as the Cuban Assassin. An inch shorter than Dynamite but a good sixty pounds heavier, the stocky Acevedo was the ultimate Cold War villain, his loco eyes, wild beard, and fatigues making him look like a crazed Fidel Castro.* Acevedo had a fast, heated rumble with Dynamite, the newcomer scoring the pin as per instructions. The crowd was sparse, but those who saw Dynamite Kid left the arena talking about him excitedly, and in the weeks to come they returned with friends.

After the match, Acevedo raved about Dynamite's skills, asking Stu if he could have a feud with the youngster. Already, the scrawny kid's stock had risen considerably with the Hart patriarch. But Acevedo didn't get his feud. Instead, Dynamite Kid, initially presented as one of the Harts' babyface friends, was thrown into a war with Australian heel Norman Frederick

*Born in Puerto Rico, raised in Cuba, and arriving in the United States in 1957 at the age of sixteen, Acevedo was a veteran of the mat game, having wrestled since the early 1960s. He settled in Calgary in 1976 and became a Stampede Wrestling mainstay for the next two decades. The fans loved to hate the wacky mongrel, who pulled all manner of foreign objects from the deep pockets of his army pants when the referees weren't looking.

Charles III. Bearded, heavily tattooed, and grizzled rotten, Charles seemed like a natural foe for young Dynamite, who was deceptively innocent looking.

Dynamite was a clean-living kid in the late 1970s. After the matches, he accompanied the wrestlers to the bar, but while they knocked back pint after pint of ale, he sipped glasses of orange juice. His only vice was smoking cigarettes. Dynamite also worked out obsessively, building a lean, muscular body.

Soon after he arrived in Calgary, Dynamite was furious to find Bruce Hart's promises – which Bruce denies having made – not kept. There was no car, no apartment, and $400 a week turned out to be $350.[3] He intended to go home after wrestling to the end of the six weeks he had committed to, but he soon found himself enjoying his Canadian adventure. Surprisingly, he and Bruce were becoming good friends. And to top if off, Dynamite was quickly becoming the biggest star of Stampede Wrestling. "Wrestling Dynamite Kid was like suddenly driving a Porsche, when we had been used to wrestling all these old slugs, which was more like driving a junky old stick shift," says Bruce.

Before long, the whole Hart clan embraced Dynamite as though he were a long-lost brother. He frequently visited Hart House for Sunday dinners, and Stu had no problem lending him any one of the Cadillacs. The boys took him camping and to parties, trying to introduce him to girls, but they quickly learned about his short fuse when he laid a few Calgarians out with his punch. Bret Hart would later say Dynamite was one of the few men he ever met who had a legitimate knockout punch. Big men crumbled like imploding buildings when the Kid landed a good one. "Tom had a vicious streak," says Ross Hart. "He had a thick Lancashire accent and could be quite insecure about it. He always thought people were mocking him. I remember we were at this old bar, the Scotch & Sirloin, and this guy came up to him and said, 'Oh, is that an English accent?' Tom knocked the guy out without hesitating. It happened so fast. The guy wasn't making fun of him."

In the wrestling world, though, such explosiveness was an asset. "He was a crazy dog, but he had a good side, too," says Bret Hart. "He was hard working and generally a straight shooter who was good for his word. He was very generous, and if he liked you, he'd give you the shirt off his back. He was the kind of guy you wanted on your team."

Even so, there was always a trace of malice lurking beneath the surface. In his autobiography, Dynamite writes about Bruce and Keith taking him to Banff to teach him to ski. As Dynamite tells it, he went up the mountain in only a T-shirt and jeans because the brothers had told him the sun would be

shining. Keith insists they told him to dress warmly and not to wear denim, but stubbornly, Dynamite thought he knew better. Like all fledgling skiers, he tumbled down the mountain repeatedly and was soon soaking wet and freezing cold. He took off his skis and stomped down the mountain, waiting for the brothers below, sulking and trying to warm up with a cup of coffee. He seethed inside when Bruce and Keith laughed at him, convinced that the trip was a set-up to make him look the fool.

In the months that followed, Dynamite harboured deep resentment about the incident and gradually extracted his revenge. He tells of purposely knocking two of Keith's teeth loose in a match but pretending it was an accident. As for Bruce, Dynamite waited until his friend was taking a shower after a Dungeon workout, then turned off the cold water tap, which was on the outside of the shower stall. The blast of scalding water made Bruce yelp. "I'm sure he still has the marks on his head from the blisters," Dynamite writes.[4]

"He had a black heart," says Bret, who compares Dynamite Kid to Ty Cobb, the notoriously mean-spirited baseball player who dominated the sport in the early part of the twentieth century. "He was the Ty Cobb of wrestling, the kind of kid that grew up and liked to torture animals." Those are particularly harsh words from Bret. Of all the Hart boys, he was ultimately the closest to Dynamite. To this day he speaks of the wrestler with praise and admiration, citing the Brit as one of the greatest influences on his own career. He's often stated his opinion that, "pound for pound," Dynamite Kid was the greatest wrestler who ever lived.

Dynamite also formed a close relationship early on with Wayne Hart, the gangly Hart son whose love of the party life often put him at odds with his father. Wayne was working for Stampede Wrestling as a referee and living in Calgary's Ramsay area near the Stampede grounds. Wayne and Tom became roommates and eventually co-owners of a duplex in the rundown neighbourhood.

One Hart brother Dynamite had little respect for, even though he did get a kick out of him, was Smith. In October 1978, Dynamite, Bruce, and Keith were to go to Oktoberfest in Hannover, Germany, to represent Stampede Wrestling in an international wrestling tournament. When Keith was unable to make the trip, Stu sent Smith – who at the time was trying to break into the business – as a replacement.

It was a tradition of the tournament that after the matches, a parade took place where each of the wrestlers' names was called, along with the country they hailed from. Each wrestler then came to the ring and waved to the fans.

When Smith was called, he came out of the dressing room wearing a Hitler moustache and his boots on the wrong feet, which made him walk bow-legged. Smith goose-stepped his way to the ring, giving the Nazi salute to the shocked and offended fans. The crowd went silent, while the wrestlers cackled with laughter. When word got back to Stu, he was fuming.[5] Once again, his oldest boy had let him down.

Although Dynamite enjoyed the twisted prank, he wondered if Smith was half mad. Life with the Hart family, he surmised, was certainly going to be strange.

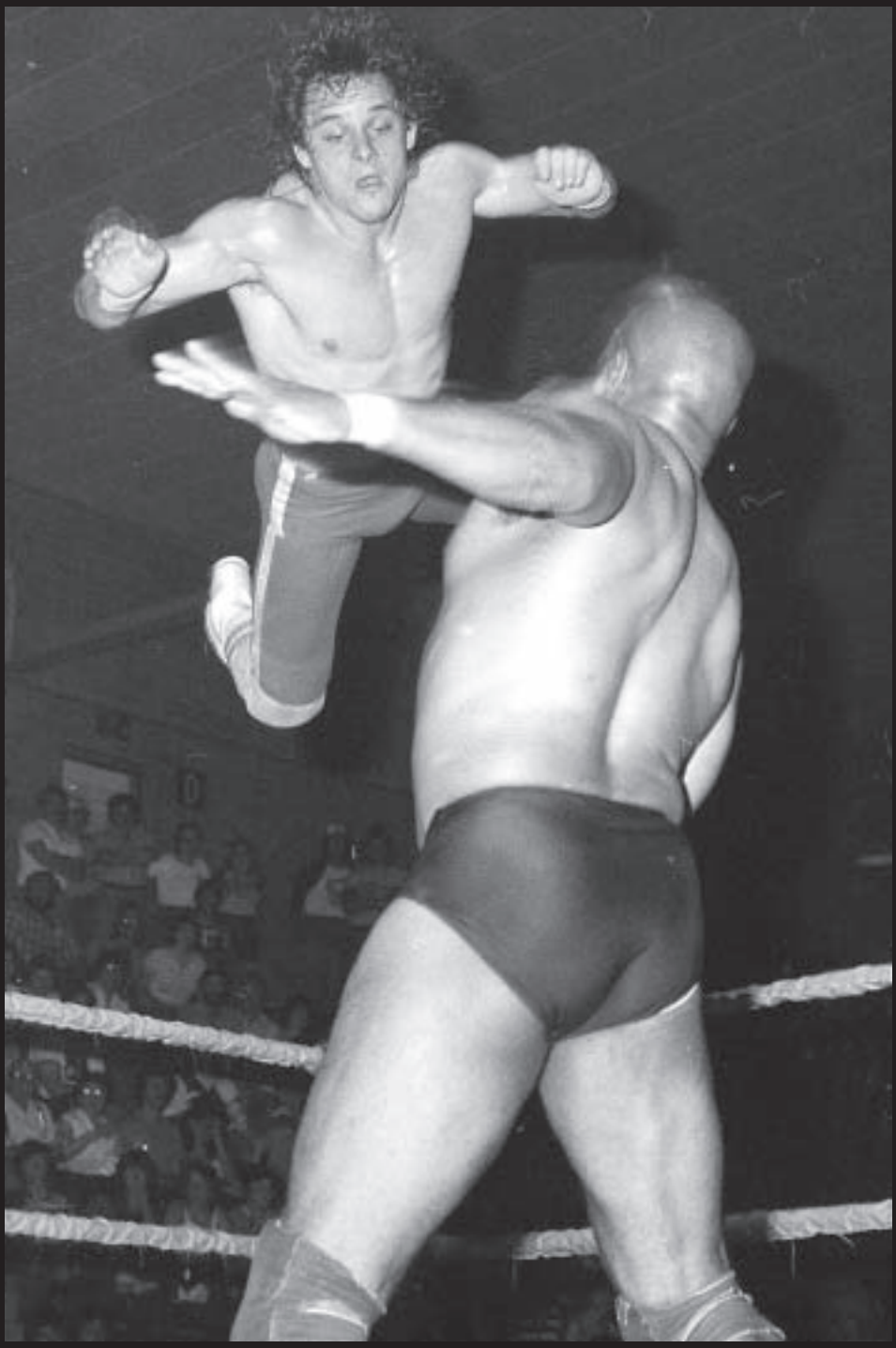
When Dynamite entered the picture, nearly all the Hart brothers had their hands in the family business – be it as wrestler, booker, referee, or producer – and they all wanted to steer the ship. But they seldom agreed on a direction. "Stu was the owner … but most of the time it was his sons who seemed to be in control," writes Dynamite. "Too many chiefs and not enough Indians."[6]

Bruce and Bret were particularly assertive in the business. Both wrestling regularly and controlling their own storylines, they often clashed. Bret says Bruce wasn't organized enough: "He'd show up at the dressing room half an hour late, scratch his head, and figure out what he was going to do that night."

Bruce also couldn't keep his ego in check, Bret charges. He ran the show for his own amusement and to glorify himself, rather than for the greater good. If he was not involved with the main event, he undermined it with the matches he was orchestrating. Stu paid big money to bring in hot names such as Archie Gouldie or David Shults, a vicious Southern wrestler who distinguished himself in the early 1980s. They'd be booked for the main event in some wild angle – a cage match (fighting inside a steel cage) or a chain match (where two grapplers would be chained together), for instance. Bruce, Bret says, would spike his own match, earlier in the card, with a blood bath or some bizarre plot twist so that plans for the main event seemed anti-climactic.

"He'd howl and slap his leg … but guys like The Stomper and Shults would be in the dressing room pulling their hair out," Bret says. "I remember both of them looking at my dad at different times and throwing their arms up: 'What now? What do you want me to do?' The guys who were pulling the wagon would just go crazy.… Bruce had no business running a dressing room. He couldn't control his own ego. He couldn't differentiate what was good for his own amusement and what was good for business."

This made Stu furious, Bret says, and Papa Hart often wanted to strip Bruce of his power, but Helen would come to her son's rescue. "My mom



Dynamite Kid flies off the ropes toward the menacing Bad News Allen, 1983.

babied Bruce so much, and she hated the business so much, that she wouldn't co-sign the cheques if Bruce wasn't kept in power. My dad had to appease my mom by keeping Bruce happy."

But some wrestlers feel Bruce's ideas were inspired. "Bruce was a genius booker," says Alison Hart's ex-husband, Ben Bassarab. "He was years ahead of his time, and what they're doing now in the WWF, he was doing twenty years ago." Wrestler Gama Singh agrees: "To me, he was the Vince McMahon of Stampede Wrestling."

Perhaps it was Bruce's egocentric quest to be a top man that led him to reconfigure the Stampede Wrestling game plan. But there's little doubt that approach revitalized the territory.

The first thing he did was turn Dynamite Kid bad. It was late in 1978 when Dynamite dramatically betrayed Bruce in the middle of a tag team match, attacking his partner from behind. "I got taken away in an ambulance, and people despised Dynamite from that moment on," Bruce says. "The hallmark of every great promotion was one really ass-kicking, awe-inspiring heel, and ours became Dynamite Kid."

The crux of the story, which Bruce devised, was that Dynamite had sold the beloved Harts out to ally himself with a fellow Brit, the corrupt millionaire manager John Foley. Like any good heel, Foley had no honour or sense of fair play, which made him the Harts' natural enemy. It was win at all costs for Foley and, with that philosophy, as well as his decadent, partying ways, he had supposedly seduced Dynamite, promising to make him a high-rolling champion.

Initially, Foley had come to Stampede Wrestling in 1976 at the end of a long career that had seen the Liverpool coal miner develop a reputation as one of the nastiest shooters in Britain. "He was a notorious tough guy," says Bret. "A real badass bully." Before arriving in Calgary, Foley had a stint wrestling in Kentucky for promoter Angelo Poffo. Foley had stretched Poffo's sons in the ring so viciously that the promoter warned him never to do it again. Foley didn't heed the warning, and the next time he was in the ring with Poffo's son Randy, he again set out to torture the rookie. Poffo ran into the ring with his other son Lanny and, in an act of frontier justice, the Poffo family kicked the hell out of Foley. John always prided himself that despite the beating he took, he never went down. Randy "Macho Man" Savage went on to be a one of the biggest WWF stars in the 1980s, while Foley migrated to Calgary.

Despite his toughness, Foley was no star when he came to Calgary. He was too short and too old, at least in his late fifties, with a flabby body, a drinking

problem and, consequently, an unsightly beer gut. Brought in as a wrestler, he failed to excite western Canadian fans. "Stu thought it was maybe time to get rid of him," Bruce says. "But we kind of felt sorry for the old fart."

Bruce decided to reinvent John Foley. He had the old geezer come to the ring and announce to Ed Whalen that he had inherited several million dollars from a rich uncle. From here on in, he was going to use his wealth, his power, and his "number one boy" Dynamite Kid to foil the Hart family.

As the weeks went by, Bruce let his imagination and his twisted sense of humour run wild, with Foley as his canvas. The old drunk's character development was so absurd it was genius, and unique in the wrestling world. The most popular show on network TV at the time was *Dallas*, so, taking a cue from the evil J.R. Ewing, John was recast as J.R. Foley, coming to the ring in a suit and cowboy hat, with wads of money clenched in his fist. Sometimes he'd enter the ring wearing a sailor's hat, as if he were the captain of his own yacht. "Money talks, Ed," he'd say with his cockney accent, laughing in the announcer's face.

On one of the road tours, when Foley had drunkenly passed out in the back of the van, Dynamite shaved off part of his manager's handlebar moustache. When Foley sobered up, he was furious. Then Bruce got another one of his bizarre ideas. He had the veteran further shave his facial hair into a Hitler-style moustache. When he wasn't appearing as some sort of cowboy Adolf, Foley came to the ring as J.R. the General, wearing a army helmet and fatigues.

J.R. was clearly a fink, a kook of the first order, and Ed Whalen had fun mocking him for his eccentricities. But J.R. gave as good as he got, and weekly he taunted the announcer: "We're having a party tonight, Mr. Whalen, with the most beautiful women in all of Calgary. And you're not invited." Then he'd put his face inches from Whalen's so the announcer could look right into his bloodshot eyes and smell his boozy breath. "Let the good times roll, Mr. Whalen." That line became another enormously popular Stampede Wrestling catchphrase.

Bruce's eyes light up when he recalls such comedy. "We used to come up with that stuff riding around in a van twenty-five hundred miles a week," he says. "We were always rolling along having a few beers and that's when we'd hatch this stuff. We'd try to conjure up these mind-bending paradoxes just to screw with people's heads. We'd have Foley come to the ring looking like Hitler and quoting Winston Churchill. 'We will fight on the beaches, Ed Whalen …' I was always trying to incorporate all these bizarre contradictions."

Allied with Foley, Dynamite Kid became a character Tom Billington could own. "Tom liked being a heel," says Michelle Billington. "When he was a good guy, he had to smile all phoney and sign autographs. That wasn't his forte. He liked being bad so he could be rude and tell people to eff-off."

And so he did. The evil Dynamite Kid strutted around the ring like an arrogant peacock, boasting about how he beat his enemies fair and square, though everybody had seen him cheat his way to victory minutes before. He'd tell Whalen that he was "often imitated but never duplicated," and he would give spectators the middle finger salute. When a fan shoved him outside the ring, Dynamite leapt into the crowd, attacking the man. "Cut that out!" yelled an irate Whalen, pulling Dynamite away.

Dynamite Kid was such an effective villain that the entire territory shifted to better accommodate him. If the early 1970s was the golden age of Stampede Wrestling, the early '80s was the Dynamite Age. It was a time where the mid-heavyweight division became just as important as the heavyweight division. Two new title belts came into play, the World Mid-Heavyweight title and the Commonwealth Mid-Heavyweight title. This gave smaller men such as Bruce Hart a chance to shine, as well as impressive mid-heavyweights like Gama Singh and Billington's cousin Davey Boy Smith, who would soon enter the picture. Bret and Owen Hart also started their careers as mid-heavyweights.

Week after week, the struggle between Dynamite and the Harts became a game of cat and mouse. By hook or by crook, Dynamite would usually retain the World Mid-Heavyweight crown and weasel-like Foley would try to dodge the Harts, who were invariably the number one contenders. But Foley insisted that Dynamite defend the belt against hopeless jobbers, who never seemed to win a match. "The number one contender is Randy Webber," a straight-faced Foley would say to the TV cameras. "You Harts will 'ave to get t' the bottom of the line."

The fast, high-flying action of the Stampede Wrestling territory in the Dynamite Age eventually changed the face of wrestling. In the last decade, the giants of the industry, the WWF and WCW, featured megastars who launched their careers weighing less than 230 pounds. Chris Benoit, Chris Jericho, Brian Pillman, Rey Mysterio Jr., Shawn Michaels, Eddy Guerrero, Matt and Jeff Hardy – they all owe a debt to Dynamite Kid. Any time you see a smaller wrestler delivering flying headbutts and performing crazy acrobatics twenty feet in the air – commonplace today – you're seeing moves Dynamite Kid brought to North America. Also commonplace are the body-destroying bumps that today's wrestlers take. Crashing through ringside tables, falling from the top

of steel cages, giving back-breaking suplexes off the top turnbuckles; it's all part of today's hardcore wrestling style, and Dynamite Kid was doing it when such things seemed akin to suicide.

The axis of evil that revolved around Dynamite Kid and his manager J.R. Foley set the tone of Stampede Wrestling for the next six years. They would be the wildest, weirdest years yet.

Chapter eleven

Married To the Hart Mafia

"I think Julie took one look at Bret and fell in love," says Michelle Billington of her older sister.

When the two sisters started working as security staff at the Regina Exhibition Grounds in 1978, they had no idea it was going to change their lives forever. Julie and Michelle Smadu were seventeen and fourteen years old respectively, living on their own, and already stuck in the lower gears of the socioeconomic machine. They spent their early years bouncing from their mother to their father to a foster home, living in welfare conditions, and it was Julie who took on the role of mother to Michelle.

Working security at the Tuesday night wrestling matches was going to be easy money and a bit of a laugh. The girls had watched Stampede Wrestling on TV a few times and thought it silly. But when Julie saw twenty-one-year-old Bret climb into the ring, she was smitten. Wrestling suddenly became a lot more appealing.

He was long and lean, six feet tall with a solid, manly frame he had yet to grow into, thick-boned with broad shoulders. He had a serious look about him, his dark brown eyes penetrating, but his baby-fat face and the thick brown hair that framed it gave him a handsome yet boyish quality that made Julie feel weak. His sexy smile sealed the deal. Work or no work, she became a regular at the wrestling matches from then on and gradually got to know her crush.

The handsome Hart family, late 1970s. Back row, left to right: Stu, Helen, Dean, Wayne, Bruce, Ross, Smith, Bret, Keith. Middle row, left to right: Alison, Diana, Georgia, Ellie. Front row: Owen.

After many months of flirting, Julie, a cute number herself with long brown hair, a ripe figure, and a sly grin, planted her first kiss on Bret on his twenty-second birthday, July 2, 1979. Things moved quickly from there. When Julie decided to move to Calgary to live with the wrestler that same year, her little sister was devastated. The only person who ever really looked out for her was slipping away. Before the year was up, Michelle dropped out of school and moved in with Bret and Julie. She took a job as a waitress at a dirty old hotel near the house Bret rented in the Ramsay Court area of town.

Michelle had seen Dynamite Kid wrestle a number of times, and she knew he was impressive. She also knew he was a creep, associated with the vile J.R. Foley, and she wasn't supposed to like him. That changed the day Bret sent her on an errand to his brother Wayne's house, two blocks away, to borrow a vacuum cleaner. Michelle rang the doorbell, expecting the Hart referee to answer. Instead, she found herself standing face to face with Dynamite Kid. What was he doing hanging around a Hart? She managed to stammer her request for the vacuum and was surprised at how pleasantly he responded. "He was very polite and sweet," she says. "Not like his ring persona at all. He was shy, not making much eye contact."

After that first meeting, Dynamite started coming out of the dressing room when Michelle was at the wrestling matches to make small talk with her. "I was always afraid Bret would see me talking to him," she says. "I didn't want to hurt his feelings by talking to the guy who had just beat him up." Although Michelle was unaware of what went on behind the scenes at the wrestling matches, there was in fact a real tension between Bret and Dynamite.

Like his father, Bret had been an excellent amateur wrestler, training since the age of nine. In his late teens, he won city and provincial championships and, while wrestling for Mount Royal College, where he was taking courses in film studies, he was encouraged to try for the Canadian team for the Commonwealth Games. But Bret was wrestling mostly to please his father. He didn't see a future in amateur wrestling and was losing his passion for it. "I started to realize there wasn't five cents in it," Bret says. "I thought if you pursued it, you'd just end up being an old amateur wrestling coach or phys-ed teacher at a high school, and I didn't want to do that."[1]

Bret was also blowing it at school and dropped out after one semester, intending to give it another try the following year. In the meantime, he needed a job and so began refereeing, all the while watching the wrestlers intently, wondering if he could do what they were doing. One day, the Japanese grappler Mr. Hito approached Bret and asked in his broken English, "You

Dynamite Kid is sent reeling by a flying uppercut from Bret Hart, early 1980s.

biggest one [of Stu's sons]. How come you no wrestle?"[2] Hito and his tag team partner, Mr. Sakurada, offered to show Bret the ropes down in the Dungeon. Stu had taught Bret submission wrestling while he was growing up, but it was the Japanese wrestlers who introduced him to the art of pro wrestling. For the next five months, Bret learned how to take bumps – how to fall and protect himself – and, more importantly, how to protect his opponents in a wrestling match, all the while making the battle look so real and punishing that nobody could see through the facade.

After wrestling his first couple of pro bouts in towns along the Stampede loop, Bret was sent on a wrestling tour of Puerto Rico. This turned out to be more embarrassing than anything else, as the less-than-dedicated Smith was his tag team partner. When Bret returned, he was pushed into a feud with the freshly turned heel Dynamite. Perhaps because of the animosity between Bruce and Bret over creative direction, Dynamite, firmly entrenched with Bruce, wrestled a series of rough, uncooperative matches with Bret.

Dynamite says that Bret was not yet comfortable with the ways of the pros and initially "wrestled stiff as a brush." Dynamite found Bret "rigid and awkward," so he broke his nose with a forearm smash. "It did the trick – he wasn't rigid anymore," Billington writes. Back in the dressing room, Dynamite says Bret was so furious he tried to pick a fight, but Hito and Sakurada held him back.[3]

Bret's skills soon improved, and he and Dynamite learned how to work together beautifully. Their matches were among the best in Stampede Wrestling history. In the *Calgary Sun*, Bret wrote of a 1981 ladder match in Regina in epic tones. As Bret sets up the action, the two men had collided skull to skull after an ill-timed move. Dynamite's head was split open, and Bret had such a gash in his face he could poke his finger through a gaping hole in his nose. "I remember Dynamite jumping up high, gripping that heavy steel ladder, coming straight down on my head," Bret writes, noting that although the blow looked devastating to the fans, the ladder never actually hit him.[4]

"Dynamite began to climb to the top [of the ladder].... Suddenly, I jumped up, throwing a desperate dropkick, just like he asked me: 'Just barely touch the ladder with your toes. I'll control how I go over.'" Bret describes the ladder wobbling and tipping over, Dynamite Kid flying into the ropes, bouncing out of the ring on top of J.R. Foley. Both fighters went to the hospital together that night for stitches, too tired to say a word but full of respect for each other.

Business aside, the friction between Bret and Dynamite heated up when the English wrestler became interested in Michelle, whom Bret viewed as a

little sister. Too insecure to ask her out, Dynamite lured Michelle over to the duplex he and Wayne shared with a spur-of-the-moment ploy. A ring rat had showed up on their doorstep; the woman had had an encounter with Dynamite somewhere along the Stampede loop and now she fancied herself his girlfriend. Dynamite wanted to get rid of her. He had Wayne phone Michelle and ask that she come over and pretend to be Dynamite's girlfriend. Michelle was only too happy to oblige.

When Dynamite answered the door, she threw her arms around him and kissed him. "Hi, honey," she said. The girl from the road was shamed and quickly made an excuse to leave. She was still packing her bags when Dynamite asked Michelle if she would like to go for a walk. "It was the most romantic walk I ever had," Michelle says. "The snow was fresh and it was crunching under our feet. He told me about his life in England. We walked around the block and he invited me in for a cup of tea. He was a real gentleman."

Dynamite was walking her back home when Bret screeched up beside them in his silver Ford El Dorado. The Hart boy was not happy. "What are you doing? Get in!" he snapped at Michelle. "I'll take it from here," he snarled at Dynamite as he drove away. On the way home, Michelle got a lecture from Bret on the evils of Dynamite. Bret told her how Dynamite "uses women and then hangs them up like his wrestling boots." He told her how The Kid disrespectfully booted the ring rats out of his room when he was finished with his business. He told her to stay away from him, lest she become just another ring rat. "I'm going to ask him what his intentions are!" Bret huffed.

Michelle hoped Dynamite's feelings were the same as hers, though deep down she didn't believe it possible. But Dynamite continued to treat Michelle like a princess, and Bret was unable to prevent the relationship from moving forward. By 1980, Michelle had moved in with Dynamite Kid. She was sixteen, he was twenty-one.

Dynamite's hair-trigger temper became evident early in the relationship. If any man gave her a second glance when they went out, Dynamite exploded. "I always missed it," Michelle says. "By the time I turned around, the guy would be lying on the ground with his teeth beside him. At the time I was flattered. It gave me a false sense of security. I was stupid." Dynamite's temper seemed far less attractive the first time he blew up on her, when she accidentally spilt an ashtray onto the carpet. Michelle doesn't elaborate on the encounter. She does say his fury was something to behold. "He was always so remorseful after [his rages]," Michelle says. "There's a switch that goes on in me head," Dynamite told her, "and I can't shut it off." Dynamite Kid came by his volatile temper naturally, but by this time there was something new in

his life that was propelling his anger to code-red proportions.

Dynamite Kid was introduced to steroids in the summer of 1979 by a 280-pound wrestler named Sylvester Ritter. Stu had christened him Big Daddy Ritter, a white-womanizing black stud who angered the hell out of the men in the predominantly white audience. Ritter, who hailed from North Carolina, was not a great wrestler, but his cocky charisma riled up fans. Stu gave him a big push in Calgary, making him North American champion.

Despite his dedication to weightlifting, Dynamite was becoming increasingly frustrated that his bulk and muscle mass was not even close to that of the heavyweight wrestlers. He was a small-boned man, never meant to be over 200 pounds in Bret's estimation, and he had a complex about that. Dynamite could see that the wrestling business was changing. The days of the beer-bellied bruiser were coming to an end. Soon, even the smaller wrestlers would be required to be finely sculpted musclemen, and no one under 200 pounds would have a chance of making it big. When Dynamite vented his spleen to Ritter, the big man gave him a handful of his first Dianabol pills. The steroids would prove to be a much-appreciated gift. Within three years, Dynamite weighed about 215 pounds of solid muscle. He had Michelle inject the juice into his backside. "Sometimes there would be three needles in each cheek," she says.

Dynamite also discovered speed around this time. Jake Roberts, a wrestler from Georgia, brought in to feud with Ritter, gave him a Yellow Jacket before he climbed in the ring one night, during the 1979 Calgary Stampede. Dynamite wrestled a one-hour match that evening and walked away with energy to spare.[5] He was sold.

Both Roberts and Ritter went on to world fame in the 1980s while working for the WWF – Ritter as the Junkyard Dog and Roberts as Jake the Snake, a grappler who brought a twelve-foot python to the ring, draping it over his victims.

Another demon on Dynamite's shoulder was former wrestler Cedric Hathaway, an eccentric Englishman who Bruce brought to the territory as a loopy, high-strung referee bent on making life hell for the Harts. Hathaway was into the occult, and every time he got stinking drunk, which was pretty much every day, he ranted about witches, which spooked Michelle. When he first came to Calgary, Hathaway stayed with Dynamite and Michelle. "That's when Tom's orange juice became vodka and orange juice," Michelle says. She remembers the first time she saw Dynamite bombed. "He was about twenty-two, I think. I remember laughing because the first time I got drunk, I was probably about thirteen."

Living with Dynamite Kid made Michelle feel important and protected. Suddenly life, which once seemed so depressing, was thrilling. When talk turned to marriage, Michelle had never been happier. The plan was to tie the knot in Golborne, but Dynamite decided he didn't want to get married in front of his family. He didn't want anybody to hear him express his love. A show of emotion like that seemed weak to him and his pride wouldn't allow it. Instead, the two got hitched in Calgary on March 25, 1982, in front of a justice of the peace.

On the way to the courthouse, a homeless person asked Dynamite for money. "Get the fook out of here, you little yard dog," Dynamite snarled. Michelle started to cry. "I can't believe I'm marrying this mean man," she thought. Somehow she reconciled the matter in her heart, however, because when the judge arrived, she became Dynamite's bride. Bret and Julie were present as witnesses.

Bret must have been inspired by the moment, because he married Julie the same year, on his birthday, also in front of the justice of the peace. The couple entered holy matrimony without telling anyone. Helen was hurt that her son did not include the family in his wedding plans. But she would be throwing plenty of weddings in the years to come. The kids were growing up. The Hart mafia was fortifying their ranks.

J.R. Foley was constantly raving at Ed Whalen during interviews about his struggles with the all-powerful Hart mafia that made life a nightmare for him and his army of heels. The system was a sham, Foley blustered, with Stu mollycoddling and favouring his sons, keeping them on top. J.R. and his men had to resort to their rotten tactics to get ahead, Foley insinuated. When Whalen defended the Harts, demented banter ensued. It was just another storyline, but the Hart mafia wasn't entirely a figment of J.R.'s mind.

The Harts really did permeate every corner of the Stampede Wrestling territory in the 1980s. It wasn't just Stu and Helen, who controlled the money, or the boys, who had a hand in every aspect of the business. Now the Hart girls were getting in on the action, too, three of the four marrying wrestlers and the other one marrying a bodybuilder and sometimes wrestler.

Bradley Joseph Annis, known around Calgary as B.J., married Stu and Helen's daughter Georgia in 1975. Stu and Helen liked B.J. the first time they met him. The Boston native had served a tour of duty in Vietnam; had a degree in marine engineering from the prestigious Kings Point military academy, near Helen's childhood home of Long Beach, New York; and was a pilot. He had

become heavily involved in competitive bodybuilding in Hawaii, where he opened up his first gym.

The cocksure B.J. began visiting Calgary for ski trips, accompanying a friend who played football with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. Eventually, B.J. decided to open a gym in Calgary, a risky proposition in the days before the fitness craze swept North America.

Twenty-eight year-old B.J. met the Hart family during the 1975 Calgary Stampede, when the kids were setting up a wrestling ring on a flatbed truck in front of the building he was converting into a gym. Blond, blue-eyed Georgia, with her kind nature, caught his attention immediately. Before long, he was dating the nineteen year old, which was fine with Stu and Helen.

What was not fine was B.J. marrying their daughter in December of that year and keeping it a secret from them for five months. When the truth got out, Helen was furious and told Stu to apply some Dungeon-worthy damage to her new son-in-law. B.J. to this day is relieved that he managed to avoid a stretching by the Hart patriarch – the only son-in-law to have done so.[6] Within a year or two, though, B.J. got back into the good books with Georgia's parents. He was certainly the son-in-law who caused them the least grief over the years. Complete with a wrestling ring and state-of-the-art weight training equipment, which bettered by far the crude facilities of Stu's Dungeon, BJ's Gym became a popular haunt for wrestlers and bodybuilders.

Another son-in-law, Jim Neidhart, came into the picture in 1979 looking to be trained by Stu. Standing six feet tall and weighing about 280 pounds, with a rock-solid beer belly, the twenty-four-year-old was built like a little tank, and Stu was only too happy to test the young man's mettle.

Neidhart was a California boy raised mostly by his well-to-do father, an accountant who spoiled his son to compensate for his divorce from Jim's mother. Neidhart had been traumatized by his parents' split and went through an introverted phase before finding his confidence in the world of sports. From the start, he was outstanding on both the baseball diamond and the football field, displaying the power of a rhinoceros. Neidhart played football for both the Dallas Cowboys and the Oakland Raiders, but the sport he really excelled at was shot put, a talent that won him a scholarship to UCLA. Neidhart's goal was to compete in the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, a dream that was dashed when the United States boycotted the Games in response to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. It was a disappointment Stu could relate to all too well – the Second World War had crushed his youthful Olympic hopes.

Unlike Stu, however, Neidhart was a man of many vices, a party boy who

went wild in the halls of academia, running afoul of the university. Stu's biographer Marsha Erb refers to a May 1979 *Washington Post* article on drug use in sports in which Neidhart is cited as a cautionary tale. According to the report, in high school, Neidhart was popping uppers before every track meet. His drug intake became even more excessive in UCLA where, in 1976, fortified by a cocktail of amphetamines, tranquilizers, and alcohol, he went on a destructive rampage, destroying his hotel room and swinging like Tarzan from his fourth-floor balcony.[7]

This was the wild child who showed up at Stu's door looking to become a wrestler. Stu embraced the big hulk from the start. "My grandfather was almost infatuated with my dad," says Jim's daughter Nattie, today a promising rookie wrestler herself. "They would go down to the Dungeon and it was like two big rams butting heads. They would literally kick the shit out of each other. They wouldn't hold back.... I think beating my dad up were some of the happiest moments of my grandfather's life." Jim would snort and spit, turn beet red and holler in pain and frustration as Stu stretched him, but he seemed to enjoy his time in the Dungeon, and he always returned, ready for anything Stu had to give him.

Before long, Neidhart was featured on Stampede Wrestling cards. Sold as a hot-headed strongman, he was popular with the fans even if he was only a moderate star in the promotion. He had yet to develop the maniacal, orange-bearded, sunglasses-wearing "Anvil" persona that later rocketed him to fame in the WWF.

Neidhart became a fixture of the Hart family when he started dating Ellie. Short and cute, with dark eyes and olive skin, the family often compared Ellie to Helen's Greek mother, after whom Ellie was named. It was more than her appearance that earned such comparisons. Ellie had the same outspoken, spicy flair. She was fiercely proud of her family, never afraid to say what she was thinking, and open with her emotions. She had a warm, loving soul, though easily upset. Ellie also had a lot of insecurities.

"She had a real lack of confidence growing up," says Keith. "She didn't have an identity, other than being Stu Hart's daughter.... She was very defensive. She hated the girls at school who had the nice clothes. She hated the girls us boys went out with ... because Ellie felt awkward. Half the time she wore hand-me-downs from the boys when business was bad. She had one dress."

When Neidhart became smitten with Ellie, flirting with her and showering her with affection, she was overjoyed that such a man was interested in her. "All of a sudden, she's got this football star paying attention to her,"

Keith says. "Here was her chance to thumb her nose at all the girls she went to school with. She was so proud to have him as her beau."

It's easy to see why Ellie would be drawn to Jim. If you were on his team, Neidhart was a great guy to be around, even if he did tend to overindulge in the party favours. "Everybody liked Jim Neidhart, except Jim," says retired wrestler Leo Burke. "He would hurt himself with the stuff he was taking, but he was everybody's friend."

Ellie and Jim Neidhart married on December 26, 1979.

In May, 1983, Alison Hart married bodybuilder Ben Bassarab, a member of BJ's Gym who the Harts took under their wing and trained to be a wrestler. But of all Stu's sons-in-law, it was Dynamite Kid's cousin, Davey Boy Smith, who would make the biggest splash in Stampede Wrestling.

Diana, the youngest of Stu's daughters, had her first big crush in 1978 when she was fifteen, and it wasn't on any of the boys in her class. None of them held a candle to the young Dynamite Kid. She was so infatuated with Dynamite when he first arrived in Calgary that during her school lunch hours she went to the apartment building he lived in to eat her lunch in the stairwell.[8]

Her crush was understandable. Dynamite Kid was a star, and as he became more ingrained in the territory and more confident in himself, he got to be quite dashing, in a villainous way. In those days, before he became too hardened and beat up, Dynamite was a good-looking lad, with his upturned Brit nose and youthful features, framed within flowing, shoulder-length brown hair. He was tougher and more athletic than any boy she knew, including her brothers.

Diana was blossoming into a striking young woman with golden hair, a pretty smile, and long, statuesque legs. She was the most athletic of the Hart girls. When she was a kid, she and Owen practised backflips in front of visiting wrestlers. Stu called her his little blond palomino. But despite her looks, she was never able to get the attention she craved from Dynamite.

And she forgot about him, when eighteen-year-old Davey Boy Smith strutted into town, in 1981. To the Hart girls, Davey Boy represented a kinder, gentler Dynamite Kid. Dynamite was wild and rough around the edges, with a mean streak. He liked to walk into a room and be feared. Davey was a softer, sweeter version of his cousin; a naive kid eager to please and get along with people.

Davey's upbringing might account for his more affable demeanour. Although he came from a similarly rough neighbourhood, his household wasn't as harsh as Dynamite's. His mother, Joyce, Dynamite's dad's sister,

was a loving woman, and Davey's father, Sid, never struck his son. Like Dynamite, Davey didn't take to schooling but, unlike his cousin, he wasn't a troublemaker.

Bruce met Davey Boy back in 1977 when he first spotted Dynamite, and even then he could see the young athlete's potential. Davey, who wanted to be just like his cousin, was already training with Ted Betley. Bruce never forgot about Davey and he kept tabs on his progress. By 1981, Bruce and Dynamite cooked up the angle. They wanted to bring in Davey Boy as a babyface and throw him into a feud with Dynamite. Davey Boy would be the Abel to Dynamite's Cain. Two fast, good-looking British lads, high-flying and tough, fighting to the death on Stampede soil. Bad seed Dynamite, J.R. Foley's number one cretin, versus pure-hearted Davey, friend of the Harts. It would sell out the arenas for weeks.

When Davey got off the plane in Calgary, Bruce was pleased. The kid was as scrawny as Dynamite had been when he first arrived, but his wiry body was cut with muscle. He was six feet tall, 180 pounds and growing, with boy-next-door features. The first time Dynamite cut that pretty head open the women would scream.

Smith moved in with his cousin and Michelle, and right away fell victim to Dynamite's malicious pranks. It seemed that each bite of food he took was spiked with either Valium or Ex-Lax, causing diarrhea attacks that sometimes lasted up to three days and were so harsh that his stomach clenched in pain. Dynamite, meanwhile, cackled outside the bathroom door.[9] Pranks aside, if Davey was going to have a feud with Dynamite, he couldn't be living with his cousin. If the fans found out, they would know the whole grudge was phoney. He soon moved in with Bret.

Smitten Diana taped a picture of Davey Boy to the inside of her school binder and began daydreaming about him. He was friendlier than Dynamite and more receptive to her flirting. Dynamite warned his cousin to stay away from Stu's daughters, telling him he would be sent home if he crossed the line. Even so, the two began dating, going to movies together. In October 1981, they took one of Stu's Caddies up to Scotchman's Hill, overlooking Elbow River, to watch the sunset. There, they made love for the first time.

From then on, Diana was ringside for every one of her boyfriend's matches, cheering him on in his epic battles with Dynamite Kid and Gama Singh, a mid-heavyweight from India who was billed as being from Pakistan. Amazingly, Diana was not wise to the workings of the business. Gama remembers humiliating Davey in a match, knocking the Brit out with his deadly Cobra hold and shaving him bald. "Diana was in tears," he says.

Top: Leo Burke, from New Brunswick's Cormier wrestling family, was a Stampede Wrestling regular from the late 1960s to the mid-'80s, holding the North American Heavyweight title on a number of occasions.

Bottom: "The Great" Gama Singh was one of the most reviled mid-heavyweights of the 1980s. Here he locks his cobra clutch hold on Japanese star Hiroshi Hase.

Davey Boy hadn't been in Calgary long before Dynamite introduced him to steroids. The first time he took a shot, it was part of another Dynamite rib. Davey Boy was gullible. He lacked his cousin's street smarts, and Dynamite delighted in making fun of him. When Davey went to his cousin looking for steroids, Dynamite told him to pull down his pants and then injected a white liquid, claiming it was Winstrol V, a water-based steroid. While on the road the next day, Davey wondered why his fellow wrestlers were laughing at him. More strangely, why were they making cow noises at him? Davey could only laugh sheepishly when he found out that Dynamite had injected him with milk.[10] Davey was on the real stuff soon enough, though, and within a couple of years had bulked up in a way his cousin never could, boasting one of the most daunting physiques in the territory. Like many of the wrestlers who went on the juice, Davey began experiencing 'roid rage. This was obvious on December 2, 1983, when the wrestlers were returning from a week on the circuit. They were driving southbound on Calgary's Macleod Trail in a bus Stu had purchased for the tours when a Pontiac Trans Am full of drunken men ran a red light. Wayne Hart, who was at the wheel, slammed on the brakes to avoid a collision. The Trans-Am stopped too, and the drunks threw beer bottles at the bus, shouting obscenities and trying to pick a fight. That's when Davey Boy leapt from the bus and sprinted toward the punks in full attack mode.

The men, realizing they had picked the wrong rumble, jumped back into the Trans Am and sped away, the bus in hot pursuit. A few blocks later, the Trans Am ran into a police checkstop. As the bus pulled up, Davey Boy burst through the door and tore toward the car like a frenzied pit bull. He pushed past the shocked officers and thrust a beefy arm through the open passenger's window. As a cloud of marijuana wafted from the car, Davey Boy yanked one of the drunks out and was about to land a punch when a constable put his flashlight across the wrestler's throat in a bid to stop the wildman. Davey Boy flipped the officer over his back, catapulting the 180-pound man twenty feet through the air.[11] Several other officers jumped Davey and subdued him as the drunks sped away, no doubt scared sober.

Stu was forced to hire a lawyer to keep one of his top stars out of jail. At first, Keith says, Stu was going to let Davey face the judge on his own. "Diana was Stu's little crown jewel, and Davey was paying too much attention," Keith says. "At first, my dad was thinking he'd either go to jail or screw off back to England and the problem would be solved. But Diana said if Davey was going back to England, she was going to go with him. Stu thought, 'Oh, oh. We'd better get him a good lawyer.'" Ultimately, Davey Boy paid a $500 fine and the Calgary media treated the case as a joke.

Davey and Diana set a wedding date of October 7, 1984. By this time, the ranks of the Hart mafia were swelling to burst. Ellie had given birth to three daughters. Georgia also had three children, with another on the way. Bret and Julie too had started a family, as had Dynamite and Michelle. Keith and Bruce were also married and having children.

On his off-time, when he wasn't booking and wrestling for Stampede Wrestling, Bruce substitute taught at a junior high, where he had met a pretty student named Andrea Redding. Later, when Bruce was no longer teaching at the school, he ran into Andrea again when she started coming to the wrestling matches. The Hart family was horrified when he began a relationship with the teenager. According to Keith, Stu and Helen were worried that the liaison might cause a scandal that could hurt Stampede Wrestling. The worrying was kicked up one hell of a notch when Andrea announced in early 1983 that she was pregnant. The couple married in June of that year. Andrea was sixteen, Bruce thirty-three.

Ross Hart defends his brother. "All of us were aware of the age difference, but they seemed to really love each other, and their marriage was quite sound.... We didn't publicize it ... but it wasn't any sort of scandal."

The wedding of Davey Boy Smith and Diana Hart, held at Hart House, did attract a lot of attention, which in this case the family welcomed. The *Calgary Sun* published a full-page spread on the "fairytale" wedding between the "British-born Hercules" and the gorgeous Hart daughter, who had posed as a Sunshine Girl the previous year. The report described giant men wearing ill-fitting suits; stoic Stu walking his teary-eyed daughter up the aisle; Davey Boy choking with emotion as he recited his vows; jolly Jim Neidhart making a sentimental toast to the bride and groom; and the whole place erupting into a party as Prince's "Let's Go Crazy" blared from massive speakers. [12]

Frenzied photographers from Japan snapped photos for the papers back home. Davey Boy, Bret, and Dynamite had been wrestling on Japanese tours for years and were huge stars in the country. Indeed, Dynamite's matches with a masked Japanese wrestler named Tiger Mask set a new standard for wrestling excellence in the junior heavyweight division. Diana recalls one of the Japanese paparazzi getting too close for Dynamite's liking. With a prime-rib bone in one hand and a beer in the other, he turned on the media man and snarled, "That's it, yard dog, I've 'ad enough of you. Now eff-off."[13]

Behind the scenes, the fairytale was not off to the wonderful start it appeared to be. Three weeks before the wedding, Davey Boy had come to Diana in tears, admitting to an ongoing dalliance with a ring rat in Edmonton who now claimed to be pregnant with his child. However, she had been

with several wrestlers and there was a good chance the baby wasn't his. Diana was inconsolable, but she loved Davey, and he loved her. Fearing he was going to lose her, he was heaving with sobs. She accepted his promise that he would never cheat again and, for years, she didn't breathe a word of the incident to anyone. It ate her up inside, though, and she lost fifteen pounds in the week leading up to the wedding.[14]

In the assessment of most insiders, Davey Boy was a good man with a kind heart, but he had a tragic flaw. "He wasn't too smart and was easily misled," Keith Hart says. "He loved being one of the boys. He would die for the boys.... And he didn't think much about consequences."

Alison loved her brother-in-law dearly but agrees with Keith: "The thing about Davey was he always followed the group. He had to be the biggest and the best. But if the whole group was going to throw tomatoes, Davey was going to throw them the furthest. If the crowd was going to riot and pulverize you, he'd go along with that, too. He followed the pack."

Chapter twelve

Let the Good Times Roll

"J.R. Foley is like a father to me, Mr. Whalen," crowed Dynamite Kid in Stampede Wrestling interviews, his arm draped over his crooked manager's shoulder. It was another angle that closely mirrored reality. At first, Dynamite and J.R. Foley were simply drawn to one another as two Brits trying to make it, surrounded by Canucks on the frozen prairies. Then they became hardcore drinking buddies. Eventually, the connection between the two men became heartfelt. "They were almost like clones of one another," says Bret Hart. "It was the old beat-up bully and the young man on his way to being a beat-up bully."

When Foley came to Canada, he brought his wife and teenage daughter. After a while, he began to think of Dynamite as a son. It turned out to be as much a curse for old J.R. as it was a blessing. The road stories of Dynamite's ribs on Foley are as endless as they are deranged. Wrestler Bad News Allen remembers sitting next to Foley in the van on one road trip. Being drunk and goofy, J.R. was wearing a paper baker's hat. "Foley kept saying, 'Jesus Christ, it's hot in here,'" recalls Allen. "I took a look at him and damn! Dynamite had set his hat on fire. I said 'Man, Tommy, you're gonna kill this guy. What's wrong with you?'"

Alison Hart's ex-husband Ben Bassarab recalls Dynamite at one Saskatoon hotel filling J.R.'s toilet with lighter fluid, knowing that Foley liked to smoke a cigarette on the can. When Foley threw the smouldering butt between his legs into the toilet bowl, the resulting flash singed his privates.

A muscular Dynamite Kid poses while J.R. Foley mugs for the camera, looking like a cross between Hitler and a vagabond.

J.R. Foley looks up at his weapon against the Harts, the seven-foot, 685-pound Brit, The Loch Ness Monster.

On another Saskatoon stop, the "millionaire manager" arrived in town soused to the gills. His pockets empty, he couldn't afford a room even at the city's dumpiest hotel, where the carpets reeked of piss, tobacco, beer, and vomit. Dynamite and Bruce snuck the old grappler into their room by way of the fire escape and procured him a cot to pass out on.

"One night, we folded the cot up with him in it and stuck him in the elevator," says Bruce, relishing thoughts of the good ol' days. "We wheeled the old fart into the lobby. He woke up the next morning not even sure where he was, with two or three drunks staring at him."

"What the fook'er you lookin' at?" slurred Foley as he stumbled back to the room in his baggie underwear, scratching his balls and rubbing his beer gut.*

Foley's wife, Vera Lynn, resented the wrestling business, blaming the sport for leading her husband down such a pathetic path. She was also bitter that, as booker, Bruce transformed Foley, a respected wrestler in England, into the clownish J.R. character. "[The angle] rejuvenated an old guy who was washed up, and it made him into a bit of a celebrity," Keith says. "But I'm sure it was hard for Vera to look at it that way."

Foley didn't need Dynamite and Bruce to humiliate him, though. He did a fine job of it himself. Keith recalls the wrestlers sleeping on the bus one night on the way back to Calgary while referee Sandy Scott drove. "Piss call, Sandy," croaked J.R. from the back of the bus. The referee was slowing down by the side of the road when a woozy Foley opened the door and stepped off, tumbling into the ditch. Scott slammed on the brakes. "We all wake up and J.R.'s crawling back into the bus," Keith says. "He's pissed all over himself and he's dirty from the ditch. He sticks his head in the door and goes, 'What th' fook'r'ya doin,' Sandy?'" Once again, the crew had big laughs at Foley's expense.

But the manager thrived on those laughs. He lived to party on the road trips. "There would be twelve guys in the van, [all these] monsters," Michelle Billington says, "and little [Dynamite] would go, 'Sing "On Top of Old Smokey," Johnny!' So he'd sing, and they'd be spraying shaving cream on top of his head, putting their smokes out in it. John was so drunk, he didn't know what was going on. When they got to Calgary, they'd walk him to his front door and ring the doorbell. They wanted to see [Vera's reaction]. He'd

*Saskatoon often brought out the worst in the wrestlers. The crowds were sparse because the arena was located on the seedy downtown strip, where parents didn't like their kids hanging out. To make matters worse, the building was unnaturally cold. "You'd be wrestling and steam would rise up off your back," Bruce recalls. "Guys would be huddled together in the dressing room.... King Kurtis used to refer to Saskatoon as 'the bitter end.'"

be trying to act sober, and she'd be saying, 'Don't drink anymore, John, or I'm leaving you!'"

It was male bonding at its most twisted but, through it all, J.R. and Dynamite had a real love for one another. Foley visited Dynamite at home, where the two would dive into the bottle. Once, Foley requested a haircut and Dynamite only too gleefully pulled out the electric razor. The cut was a horror, Foley's hair reduced to scattered clumps. "Looks fookin' great, Tommy," he said. "I knew ye' could do it." By that night's end, the fearsome Dynamite Kid was sitting on his surrogate dad's lap as J.R. drunkenly crooned the tune "Danny Boy." It was disturbing and touching all at once.

"I don't think Foley would've lived as long as he did if he wasn't around Dynamite," says Bad News Allen. "Just being around Dynamite, drinking and doing ribs. He really loved Tommy."

J.R.'s army was the most inspired concept of Stampede Wrestling's Dynamite Age. Instead of having one or two cretins wreaking havoc on the territory, there was an army of them under the comical tyrant J.R. Foley, locked in a mock epic struggle with the Hart dynasty. The ongoing saga gave Stampede Wrestling a fun flavour all its own. A number of J.R.'s goons are unforgettable.

Take "No Class" Bobby Bass, one of the best examples of Ed Whalen's influence in the territory. Dennis Baldock from Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, had long been wrestling under the Bobby Bass moniker when he came to Stampede Wrestling in 1980. Back then, the Maritimer was selling himself as a Texas outlaw. But Bass's name really took off the night he threw a midget so high into the air that the guy dinged the lamp hanging above the ring. Whalen was appalled and dubbed the heel "No Class" Bobby Bass. The name caught on and soon whole arenas were chanting it, united in their loathing of the midget-tosser.

Then there was bleach-blond Brit "Exotic" Adrian Street, who brought Gorgeous George's effeminate routine into the 1980s with a shock-rock blast. Street, all of five-foot-three, took the Gorgeous One's robes and rouge to the next level by wearing pigtails, pink boots, and a full-on makeup job that was part Alice Cooper and part transvestite. He frequently disoriented his opponents by planting a kiss on their lips. As the wrestlers jumped about, wiping their mouths in horror, Street would land some sort of dirty blow and win the match. Little boys in the audience could be heard chanting, "Fag-got! Fag-got!" until hoarse.

Stu wasn't comfortable with Street's gimmick, and he lasted in the

territory only a month or so, in 1981. But his interviews remain hilarious. "My opponent had the audacity to cast aspersions on my manhood," Street seethes in true drama-queen fashion. "I'm a man! A real man! You Hart brothers, I'm going to show you what a man can do!"

Another bizarre character was Judas Rosenbloom, a crooked black pimp straight out of a blaxploitation flick. The "mind-bending paradox," as Bruce Hart cooked it up, was the Jewish name, black Jewish pimps being rare in the wrestling world – or any world for that matter.

"Champagne" Gerry Morrow from Martinique was a Stampede Wrestling mainstay for the better part of two decades starting in 1975. Morrow made a big splash with the Cuban Assassin as the Cuban Commandos. He called himself "Champagne" Gerry to allude to all the partying and womanizing he did. Whalen scoffed at such claims, referring to Morrow as "Rot Gut" Gerry.

No one who laid eyes on the 685-pound, nearly seven-foot behemoth known as the Loch Ness Monster would ever forget the sight. While he was not as charismatic or as skilled as Andre the Giant, Loch Ness was nevertheless a big attraction. People loved to watch him squash his opponents with his ring-rumbling body splashes. Loch Ness made an impression on his fellow wrestlers, too. "He was a big, stinky man," remembers Ben Bassarab. "He was so big he couldn't use a toilet in the hotels. He'd piss and shit in the tub and then try to make us rookies clean it up. I said, 'Nah, I ain't doing that.'"

One of the great tag teams of the period was "The Masters of Disaster," Duke Myers and Kerry Brown. Tattooed, bald, and beer-bellied, Myers, from Portland, Oregon, looked like a vicious sailor gone AWOL. He was notorious for the black glove he wore to the ring for each match, supposedly as a wrist brace on doctor's orders. The glove was loaded with a piece of lead, which helped him level many a babyface. Somehow, the referees never caught on to his trick.

Brown, from Winnipeg, was the nephew of grappling vet Bulldog Bob Brown, who also worked for Stu over the years. For a big man – Brown's rotund physique made Myers look trim – Kerry took some amazing bumps, constantly careening over the top ropes and into the audience. He also portrayed the smart-ass villain role with a humorous flair. "Bruce Hart, I saw you at the Eighth Avenue Mall at one of those burger stands, and you were standing on a crate because you could not see over the counter," he once lied in an interview. "You want a title match? You've got to be kidding."

But few bad guys had a way with words like Tennessee's Roy Wayne Ferris, who came to the territory in 1982 as a slick, sleazy Southern redneck by the name of Honky Tonk Wayne. Ferris developed the character – based on

Schneider, the oily janitor with the pencil-thin moustache on TV sitcom *One Day at a Time* – while wrestling in Florida. In Calgary, Wayne started slicking back his hair and wearing costume jewellery to the ring. He even wore an Elvis Presley jumpsuit a Florida fan had given him. Gradually, his character morphed into that of a sleazy Elvis impersonator. That transformation was complete in the late 1980s, when Vince McMahon recruited Wayne into the WWF as hated Elvis-wannabe Honky Tonk Man.

Wayne's physical skills in the ring were average at best, but on the microphone he was one of the greats, selling himself as an arrogant, fast-talking hillbilly with moonshine in his veins, a motor in his mouth, and a cheating heart. By the time he got to the WWF, he had the shtick down pat and, for a time, it made him a star.

"Dr. D" David Shults, the D standing for death, came to Stampede Wrestling in 1980 as another of Foley's minions. Hailing from Memphis, the six-foot-four, 270-pound grappler, a former solider in the U.S. Army, quickly distinguished himself as a fierce brawler and the most charismatic heel in the territory at the time.

Shults, who had a goatee and a shock of tightly curled blond hair, was also a master on the microphone, towering over Ed Whalen and making boastful proclamations in a style that was equal parts Wolfman Jack and Muhammad Ali. "Sheriff Shults has come to town, baby!" he'd rave. "The rich girl's lover and the poor girl's dream! Dr. D! King David! The Messiah of the Mat!" The fans loved to hate him and later, when he joined the good guys, they cheered him wildly.

David Shults was one of the all-time great Stampede Wrestling characters. But behind the scenes, many claim, Shults was not all that different from his Dr. D character. Laurie Mills, a member of the Calgary Boxing and Wrestling Commission, was leery of the Southern wrestler: "You never knew what he was going to do. He had his own ideas, and he could be hard to handle.... I never knew how much of [his persona] was made up, because he was a showman. But he was very nasty."

Certainly, Shults was a prickly individual who liked to intimidate people, his fellow wrestlers included. Some wrestlers were even scared to step in the ring with him because if they did something he didn't like, even accidentally, he'd deal with them harshly. As Ross says, "he was a bomb waiting to explode." "He had a temper and he could back it up, too," says Shults's friend Leo Burke, who considers his fights and tag matches with Dr. D among the best work of his career. "He was the kind of guy that [if he came after you,] you'd have to kill him to make him stop."

Dynamite recalls a match in which he briefly ran afoul of Shults after accidentally catching the Southern wrestler with a knee to the jaw. Shults stormed toward him in the dressing room: "Tahmmy, if you wanna play them kind of fuckin' games, I'll play them right back." Dynamite stood his ground. "Look, accidents do happen, Dave. What's the crack here? You get a little fucking love tap and you're upset over that? A man of your size?" Shults seemed surprised that Dynamite had stood up to him and said, "Tahmmy, we're friends. You're right. Anybody can make a mistake."[1]

Such a turn of events was typical for Shults, says Bad News Allen. "He was a gutless bully. If he knew he could beat someone, he'd go after them, but if he knew somebody could stand up to him, he would back down."

Shults was a loner. He refused to do the weekly circuit in Stu's beat-up vans and buses. Instead, he took his own cars, a Lincoln Continental and a black Ford LTD he called Midnight. He drove night and day. He was choosy as to who could ride with him. Leo Burke and the Cuban Assassin were among the chosen few. Bruce Hart was most certainly not.

In one match, when Shults was in the ring against Bruce, the Southerner felt Bruce tagged him with a couple of legitimate punches. In retaliation, Shults grabbed Bruce by his blond locks, threw him against the ropes, and smashed him square in the face. "He blew up Bruce's eye good." Keith says. "I thought he broke the socket. He didn't knock him out, but he sure as hell hurt him." Bruce angrily confronted Shults back in the dressing room. He never received much support over the incident from either his brothers or father. Honky Tonk claims Stu joked about the punch. Bret thinks his brother had it coming for being careless in the ring and hurting his opponent. "Bruce was used to everybody taking it because he was the promoter's kid, but Shults just drilled him," Bret says. "Shults was a hot-headed guy. One day he would be in a great mood, and the next day he would be bitchy and sour. But he was a great character and a hard worker. I liked him.... He had a short fuse ... but if you treated him professionally and dealt with him in a straight-up manner, he was pretty agreeable."

Shults achieved fame in 1984 when his friend Hulk Hogan helped get him booked in the WWF, where the two men wrestled against one another. But Shults's run in the big time was short-lived. On December 28, 1984, ABC-TV's news program *20/20* was shooting an exposé on pro wrestling and conducting interviews in the Madison Square Garden dressing room. Reporter John Stossel approached Dr. D and suggested that wrestling was phoney. "You think this is fake?" barked Shults, smacking the reporter in the ear and knocking him to his knees. The footage aired across North America. Stossel

collected U.S.$425,000 in an out-of-court settlement with Titan Sports.[2]

Shults was finally cut loose in the lead up to the first WrestleMania, held March 31, 1985, when he tried to attack the actor Mr. T in an unscripted incident during a WWF show in Los Angeles.[3] Mr. T was part of the wrestling extravaganza's main event and, according to Hulk Hogan, Shults was angry he was not part of the angle.[4]

Shults wrestled for a few years after that incident, even returning to Stampede Wrestling for a while in 1986, when he nearly gave Jim Davies, a *Calgary Sun* columnist and ringside announcer, a heart attack. Davies had written a piece about the Stossel incident, which Shults didn't appreciate. He pinned Davies against the wall in the dressing room, screaming, "Are you trying to make a name for yourself at my expense?"[5]

By the late 1980s, Shults had retired from wrestling, reportedly finding work as a bounty hunter. I established contact with the reclusive ex-wrestler through his friend Bob Bryla, who sits on the screening board of the Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame in Schenectady, New York.

Bryla explained Shults is intensely private, not wanting anybody to know even where he lives, and he didn't think the wrestler would do an interview. After much back and forth, Bryla sent me an e-mail, passing on a message, supposedly from Dr. D: "Bob, tell Heath if he puts all the questions about me in true/false form, I will look at them. Let him know I am on a mission over in the Middle East area and it is top secret. Don't tell him who, what, where, or when."

The questions were sent off, and a few days later, the answers arrived. Shults answered "true" to punching out Bruce, being a loner, and working as a bounty hunter. He answered "false" to the suggestion that he was a hot-tempered sort who frightened his fellow wrestlers and tried to attack Mr. T. He also added a question of his own to the list: "There are many lies about the great DOCTOR D. True." In a parting message, Shults called himself "the greatest pro wrestler of all time" and claimed that lesser wrestlers like to spread lies about him out of envy. "Be very careful of what you hear and what you read," he warned.

Was the message really from him? It was certainly true to the character I had pieced together from so many sources. Even Dr. D's e-mails are intimidating.

With such a volatile mix of characters in the territory, not to mention the emergence of steroids in the business, it's no surprise that misadventures came fast and furious. After one particular evening of booze-fuelled mayhem in the early 1980s, the party carried on well after last call, ending up at

the duplex where Dynamite and Wayne Hart lived. Duke Myers, who at the time rented one side of the property with his wife and children, was in on the revelry. Duke was a bad drunk. On this night, he lit a cigarette, flicking his match in Dynamite's face. The Kid swore at him, and Duke grabbed a baseball bat sitting by the door. "You wanna go, Tommy?" he screamed, swinging his club like a caveman.

"It was frightening," says Michelle Billington. "Nobody else did anything, but Tom stood up to him.... Duke was looking down on Tom, but if you were there, Tom looked bigger than Duke Myers, and Duke backed down. He was so fucked up ... but he still knew Tom could kick his ass." Realizing he was about to go toe to toe with Dynamite brought Myers to his senses, Michelle says. "[I think he thought,] 'What am I doing, calling on Dynamite? I won't have any teeth left.' He backed down and apologized."

As always, there were the road trips from hell. Perhaps the worst was a near fatal crash that occurred one winter night in early 1982 as Bruce Hart raced down the glare-ice highway in his father's brand new Cadillac Seville, trying to make a show in Lethbridge. Jim Neidhart was sucking back beers in the passenger's seat, while Mr. Hito, Gerry Morrow, and a road hand reclined in the back. Suddenly, a semi-trailer heading toward them turned into a gas station, veering into the wrestlers' path. Bruce pumped the brakes but the car skidded on the ice. Its hood folded like a squeezebox as the car slid into the semi's back tires. If the car had hit the side of the semi straight-on, the wrestlers would have been decapitated.

Bruce Hart sat for a moment, trembling. He let go his death grip on the steering wheel, realizing the steering column had broken off in his hands. In shock, he stepped out of the car into the icy night. But it wasn't the chill that jolted him back into reality; it was the third vehicle, a truck that careered past him, almost mowing him down. The truck collided into the same semi-trailer Bruce had hit.

The rest of the stunned wrestlers crawled from the car. They had taken a brutal beating inside the vehicle. Morrow had hurt his back and separated his shoulder. Hito, whose face was badly torn up, had broken his wrist and hip and dislocated his knee. But it was Neidhart who had been injured the worst. He stumbled toward the gas station bathroom, blood dripping onto his jacket, to inspect the damage. When he looked in the mirror, he shrieked. His nose was hanging by a thread of skin. He required plastic surgery, and about ninety stitches, to reattach it.

Despite such awful scenes, Bruce was at the top of his game in the early 1980s. As a creative force, he was a bolt of lightning, bringing fresh,

entertaining concepts to the business. Regardless of what Bruce's detractors may say, he was taking Stampede Wrestling in a bold, influential direction that yielded some of the promotion's most unforgettable moments.

It wasn't only the way he and his spectacular recruits brought the mid-heavyweight division to main event status. Bruce was among the first North American bookers to use ring entrance music in a significant way, with major stars coming to the ring as signature tunes blared from the speakers. By the mid-1980s, this was a staple of WWF events. Today, Vince McMahon commissions rock and hip-hop artists to write theme songs for his stars. In the early '80s, Dynamite Kid arrogantly strutted down the aisle to the regal strains of British composer Edward Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance." The Cuban Assassin made his entrance to "The Lonely Bull" by Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass. Heartthrobs Davey Boy Smith and Bruce Hart came out to Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger" and The Eagles' "Heartache Tonight" respectively, while David Shults's theme was the Mac Davis country hit "It's Hard to Be Humble," a perfect testament to his egomania.

A fine idea that never caught on in a big way was the penalty card system, inspired by German wrestling events. Each time a wrestler broke the rules, he was given a yellow card. A grappler was allowed two yellow cards in a match – which gave the heels two opportunities for cheating. On the third offence, a red card was issued, disqualifying the cheater. On major offences, the referee could hand out black cards, which meant a wrestler was suspended without pay from the territory.

This set the stage for Bruce's next innovation, the heel referee, the great abuser of power in the wrestling ring. The inept referee had long been a staple of the game and there had been angles involving corrupt referees in the past, but Bruce took the idea to a new level, where the evil referee became an integral part of the main event.*

Stampede Wrestling's ultimate referee-gone-bad was the lanky Scotsman, Sandy Scott. Week after week, Scott tormented the Harts, his bad decisions causing them to lose match after match. He always favoured J.R. Foley's army, and before long it became clear he was being paid off by the millionaire manager.

The Scott plot culminated in late 1980 when Scott levied an unfair suspension on Bruce. As the plot thickened, Bruce took the matter to officials of the

*The idea hit the world stage during the 1980s with dirty WWF officials such as Danny Davis, who conspired with the bad guys. The corrupt official angle was taken even farther in the 1990s when Vince McMahon became part of the storyline as the evil promoter, constantly trying to screw over fan favourites, including Stone Cold Steve Austin.

Top: Southern baddie "Dr. D" David Shults, one of the most vicious brawlers of the early 1980s, hammers a blood-ied Bobby Burke to the mat.

Bottom: Looking like a crazed Fidel Castro, the Cuban Assassin was the ultimate Cold War villain. Here he is about to land a knee on Irish Paddy Ryan in the late 1970s. The ref-eree is nineteen-year-old Bret Hart.

National Wrestling Alliance, who reinstated him. In a rage, Sandy attacked Bruce, pummelling the Hart boy with a cane, which Scott then gouged into the wrestler's windpipe. This led to a grudge match between the two on Boxing Day, which sold out the Pavilion that bitterly cold night.

But despite the good business this angle generated, Bruce got only resistance from his father. "My dad hated it," says Ross. "He thought [a heel referee] was taking the focus away from the villain wrestlers. But it made us money. People were packing the arenas every night to see Sandy Scott get killed. Conservative types like [photographer] Bob Leonard and [Edmonton co-promoter] Mike Bulat were saying, 'Stu, he's going to kill the promotion.' But people kept coming. People could really identify with the idea of the corrupt authority figure."

Ed Whalen was not a fan of Scott's either. As part of a storyline, Scott slapped Bruce in the face, Bruce supposedly powerless to defend himself lest he be suspended again. This riled up Whalen, who in turn slapped Scott. Scott grabbed Whalen by the throat and hissed, "Don't you fucking touch me, Whalen!" Whalen stormed off, promising that Scott would be fired. Once he had time to cool off, Whalen admitted he had crossed the line, but he held a grudge against Scott and began cutting the referee off in interviews. "Sometimes [Whalen] abused his power," Ross says.

Behind the scenes, Scott was the most ruthless womanizer on the road. "He was pretty good with the stick," Ross says. "He must have had a hundred women out there. He'd claim one in every town. Some of them went on to be wives and girlfriends of other wrestlers. He could be very smooth and elegant, really polite and charming." One of Scott's frequent conquests was an overweight ring rat in her fifties from Montana. Her name was Hazel, but the boys dubbed her "The White-Haired Tornado." She showed up at the matches when Stampede Wrestling came to town and pleasured the wrestlers in the dressing room. Sometimes her sad-sack husband came to the arena with her. Ross always thought the old guy knew what was going on but played dumb to save face.

Ross says he never understood the appeal of the White Tornado, who he estimates weighed around 225 pounds. Even so, she never had trouble collecting notches on her bedpost. Sometimes she accompanied the wrestlers on road trips, performing fellatio on the driver. "We'd pass by [on the highway] and you'd see her head pop up," Ross says. "The wrestler would be kind of embarrassed, but I guess it was hard for some of them to resist. Sandy [Scott] was serviced by her, too, but he was never shy about it. He didn't give a shit what anybody thought."

One evening, Dynamite played his Ex-Lax prank on the White Tornado, slipping an overdose of the laxative into the groupie's drink. She was sick for days. Not long afterward, when Scott was Ex-Laxed, he assumed Dynamite had done it. For days, Scott was overcome by diarrhea attacks and couldn't work, which angered Stu. Stu reprimanded Dynamite, who swore his innocence. Once Scott had recovered, he reported for work, showing up at a Mohawk gas station on Calgary's Edmonton Trail that had long been the weekly meeting place for the wrestlers to catch their rides and head out on the road. Scott was sitting in the van waiting to embark on the week's trek when Dynamite, still fuming at the accusation made against him and seeking revenge, punched him in the face. Scott jumped out of the van, announced he was quitting, and went to get his bag from the back of the van. It was gone. Dynamite had thrown it into a tree.

"Sandy was emotionally and physically wounded and he didn't work for another two weeks," Ross says. "Bruce patched it up, and Sandy did come back, but he was never the same after that. Tom had been a good friend of his, and to be attacked like that by him in front of all the boys.... He was pretty upset."

Ultimately, it was Scott's womanizing that did him in. He had been sleeping with a fifteen year old, Ross says, and the girl's mother was furious when she found out. She called the immigration board on Stampede's dirty referee. As luck would have it, Scott had allowed his visa to expire. He needed to leave the country – fast – and the next thing anybody knew, he was gone. The Harts never heard from their crooked official again.

Chapter thirteen

A Pop Culture Stampede

"We love stampede wrestling, We Love Stampede Wrestling," chimed the chorus of the happy Reggae tune, which Stu Hart was told was a hit song in Antigua. As far-fetched as it may sound, *Stampede Wrestling* was being broadcast in the Caribbean in the early 1980s, and the low-budget Western Canadian show had become a sensation in Antigua. It was such a hit that the prime minister of Antigua and Barbuda, as well as a senator and that country's minister of justice, paid Hart House an unexpected visit in 1982.

It was not the first visit Stu had received from Stampede Wrestling fans in faraway lands. At another point in the early 1980s, Hart House had been descended on by a busload of Swahili-speaking Kenyan missionaries who wanted to meet the Hart family.[1] But this time it was different. These Antiguan dignitaries had a business proposition. They wanted Stu to send his best talent, Ed Whalen included, to their country to put on a show. They offered to pay for the wrestlers' flights and all their expenses, the gate to be split with Stu. They played the Hart patriarch a tape of the hit song to impress upon him how popular Stampede Wrestling was in their country.[2] An Antiguan named Charles Buffong, who wrestled for Stu at the time, confirmed that his relatives watched the TV program and loved it: on Monday nights, when the show aired, the streets were empty because everybody was inside watching wrestling.

Reports vary as to whether Stu had been sending tapes of the show to the

The heels ride in the 1979 Stampede parade. At the far left is Sylvester Ritter, who would go on to become the famed Junkyard Dog in the WWF. Behind Ritter is Hercules Ayala, and Dynamite Kid is perched beside him. J.R. Foley sits in the front seat. The other man and the woman are unidentified.

Caribbean or if the tapes were bootlegs. Since the early 1970s, pirated copies of *Stampede Wrestling* had seeped into as many as thirty countries, many of them developing nations looking for free programming to broadcast from their ramshackle TV stations. Most of the time, the Harts knew where the show was being seen only once reports drifted back to them. Stu never saw a dime from any of it and never sued to rectify the matter. "My dad was fairly pragmatic about things," Keith says. "Maybe if he thought he had half a chance at collecting some of the dues, he would have."

As Laurie Mills, former chairman of the Calgary Boxing and Wrestling Commission, aptly puts it, "Pro wrestling is based on smoke and mirrors and bullshit," and often, as the stories make the rounds, facts get mixed up with fiction. No one can say with any certainty where and when the show aired, but without a doubt, it had wings and it flew around the world.

In a March 1981 wrestling program, Stu writes that *Stampede Wrestling* had been voted the most popular TV sports show in Saudi Arabia. It also had a devoted following in West Germany, Singapore, Bangkok, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda. Ed Whalen, his wife Nomi says, received a letter in the 1970s from Idi Amin, the Ugandan dictator. Amin was such a *Stampede Wrestling* fan that he wanted to bring the show to his country and he invited the announcer to be a guest in his home. While Ed and Nomi were avid travellers, they "politely declined" the invitation, Nomi says.

Either way, Ed Whalen took great pleasure in telling people how recognized he was around the world as the host of Stampede Wrestling. "It's like the old cowboy ditty, 'I've Been Everywhere,'" Whalen wrote in the *Calgary Sun*. "I have been everywhere – like Europe, Japan, Australia, Singapore, the jungles of North Africa … the list goes on and on. In places like Rome and Beijing, there's old Eddie, jabbering away in English, with subtitles at the bottom of the screen."[3]

Kevin Newans, a long-time sports director at Calgary's CFCN-TV, told the *Calgary Herald* he watched Stampede Wrestling in Seoul, Korea, while covering the 1988 Olympics. "I woke up at three in the morning … flicked on the TV, and, believe it or not, there's Ed Whalen calling Stampede Wrestling.… I told our crew, if you've got insomnia or whatever, Eddie's on all night … because they'd replay those shows over and over."[4]

Keith Hart got a taste of Stampede's global popularity in the most unexpected of places. In the 1970s, he and Bruce toured New Zealand, where they wrestled a pair of rough hometown boys, Butch Miller and Luke Williams. Butch and Luke had been wrestling for Stu off and on since the mid-'60s as a crazed team called The Kiwis. In Western Canada, they were cast as villains,

but in their native country they were loved, and when Bruce and Keith arrived to wrestle them, the tables were turned. The Harts wrestled as villains, and, in the great heel tradition, they became a pair of no-good cheaters. Keith was shocked when an old woman in the front row chastised him for his conduct. "Your father and Ed Whalen wouldn't like this a bit," she said scoldingly. Keith later learned that *Stampede Wrestling* had been airing in that country.*

The popularity of Stampede Wrestling knew no bounds. Keith's doctor was travelling on a riverboat through Malaysia when one of the tour guides played a videotape of *Stampede Wrestling*. When the doctor told the Malaysians he knew the Hart family, they were incredulous and treated him like a dignitary for his connection to such greatness.

When the great Muhammad Ali passed through Calgary in 1976 for a promotional training tour – as he readied himself for his boxer versus wrestler match in Tokyo with Japanese star Antonio Inoki – the icon requested a meeting with Stu. Ali, always a wrestling fan, had heard the legends and wanted to meet the man himself. When they finally came face to face in the dressing room of the Corral, they engaged in a friendly verbal sparring match about the merits of their respective sports. They even got into a bit of playful shoving, pretending to go toe to toe for the cameras.

Without a doubt, when Stu decided to make the trek to Antigua with his stars in tow in the summer of 1982, his Western Canadian promotion had become a global phenomenon. The NHL's Calgary Flames was not quite two years old, and the Winter Olympics were six years away. Stampede Wrestling, in its many incarnations, had lasted more than three decades. Along with the Calgary Stampede, of which wrestling was a popular component, Stampede Wrestling had put Calgary on the international map.

Stampede-mania. That's the word that best describes exactly what the cast of Stampede Wrestling experienced when they got off the plane in Antigua that July.

In the days before "Hulkamania" exploded around the world, this was a reception no pro wrestler expected. Certainly not those on a Canuck prairie circuit. Whalen remembered the moment as surreal. A band played in greeting as thousands of screaming fans jammed the runways, smiling and waving at the stars.[5] As the wrestlers made their way to the arrivals area, they decided to give the buzzing crowd an impromptu show. The heels attacked

*Butch and Luke would go on to wrestle for the WWF in the 1980s as the clownish Bushwhackers.

the babyfaces, and members of the frenzied crowd tried to get in on the action. The Antiguan prime minister had to dodge flying objects hurled at the heels as the police intervened.[6]

The shows, two held in Antigua and one in Guadeloupe, an island country just to the south, were a smash success, with twenty-thousand people showing up at the stadium on the first night. The wrestlers, who were treated like royalty, thought they had found heaven on earth. They ordered steak and caviar back at the hotel, and J.R. Foley drank several bottles of vintage wine. Nomi Whalen says the Antiguans even offered Ed a prostitute for the night, a perk he graciously declined.

But the Antiguan adventure was not without its problems. Smith's wife was from nearby Puerto Rico, so Stu took a chance on his often irresponsible eldest son and put him in charge of the show. If he was ever going to give Smith a chance to prove himself, this seemed like the time and the place to do so. But immediately after the shows, Ross Hart says the U.S.$25,000 profit collected went missing. The wrestlers were furious when they found out there was no money for them, Dynamite blaming it on Smith and demanding his head. Smith later told the family he took the money with him when he paid a visit to Puerto Rico. There, he gave it to a fellow wrestler for safekeeping, worried he would be robbed on the island. That wrestler took the money and went into hiding, claiming that Stu shortchanged him in the past and so owed him. The police were called and the wrestler was charged with theft, according to Ross. Smith recovered some of the money, but Stu wound up paying many of the boys out of his own pocket.

Stampede Wrestling was so popular in Antigua that the wrestlers were flown in for another show in October of that same year. This time, sixty-seven-year-old Stu came along. Clearly, the ship could not run without its captain.

Stampede Wrestling put Calgary on the international map, and the city was nothing short of revered in the world wrestling community. Letters poured in weekly from every corner of the globe – including Japan, Australia, Europe, and the United States – from wannabe grapplers hoping to work for Stu, who had developed a reputation as a promoter who would give young unknowns the chance to prove themselves. "My real ambition in wrestling is to work a territory such as Stampede full time," wrote a young New Yorker named Mick Foley in 1987. Though Foley never did work for Stu, he went on to be one of the WWF's biggest stars in the 1990s, notorious for his insane stunts, his ability to absorb punishment, and his fearlessness: the very style Stampede Wrestling helped birth.

Stampede was not a territory where wrestlers came to get rich or world famous, and there were no free rides – you either had to be tough or bursting with charisma – but if you could make it there, you had a leg up on grapplers from other territories. For serious students of the game, completing a tour of duty in Stampede was a badge of honour. You had paid dues that many a man could not pay.

"I had a T-shirt made up after my first run [in Stampede] that said, 'I survived Calgary,'" says wrestler Honky Tonk Wayne. "It was a test of a man's ability physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally. You had to deal with Stu, his children, all the other boys, the politics, the crazy ribs, the elements, and those long road trips. [Before I came to Stampede,] I had been wrestling in Florida, where our longest trip was maybe two hundred miles. For Stu, you'd cross the Prairies every week. It was difficult.... That's a fraternity not a whole lot of guys are a member of.... If the van broke down, well, it became a matter of survival. Y'all have to take care of each other.... Some guys would come and stay maybe two weeks, and they'd leave 'cause they couldn't take it. But if you stayed three months, six months, a year, that said something."

According to wrestling journalist David Meltzer, Calgary had become a sort of pro wrestling mecca. "In 1987, when I met [Japanese star] Chigusa Nagayo, at the time the most popular woman wrestler who ever lived, the first thing she wanted to know about North America was, 'Have you ever been to Calgary?' as opposed to a non-wrestling fan who would ask about Hollywood or New York," Meltzer writes. "To her, Calgary was a mythical wrestling paradise ... with real, hard-fought matches, no-nonsense competitors and the fastest paced style in North America."[7]

Because Stu was so open to global talent, Stampede Wrestling also became a melting pot of wrestling styles. There was the meat-and-potatoes Canadian style rooted in sound technical grappling, and the hard-shooting style of the Europeans. There were the Southern brawlers and the deadly Japanese, who kicked as if they were out to take heads off. There were the Sumo-fat heavyweights and the high-flying mid-heavyweights. Perhaps more than any other territory, Stampede had it all. It forced wrestlers to adapt to anything and everything. It ground out the weak and made the survivors hard.

Even the fans in Stampede country were tougher than those in other territories. Flashy gimmicks and fast talkers were fine, but not at the expense of hard-fought battles. "We had the miners, the lumberjacks, guys who wanted to see a very real style," says Bret. "When you walked out of the arena after a good show, everyone was buzzing. There was real tension in the matches.

When the work was bad, it didn't draw.... It was all about credibility. Next to Japan, [Stampede Wrestling] seemed the most real."[8]

Keith Hart seldom got into trouble. That's why he was so distressed in the winter of 1981 when he found himself behind bars in a Kalispell, Montana, jailhouse.

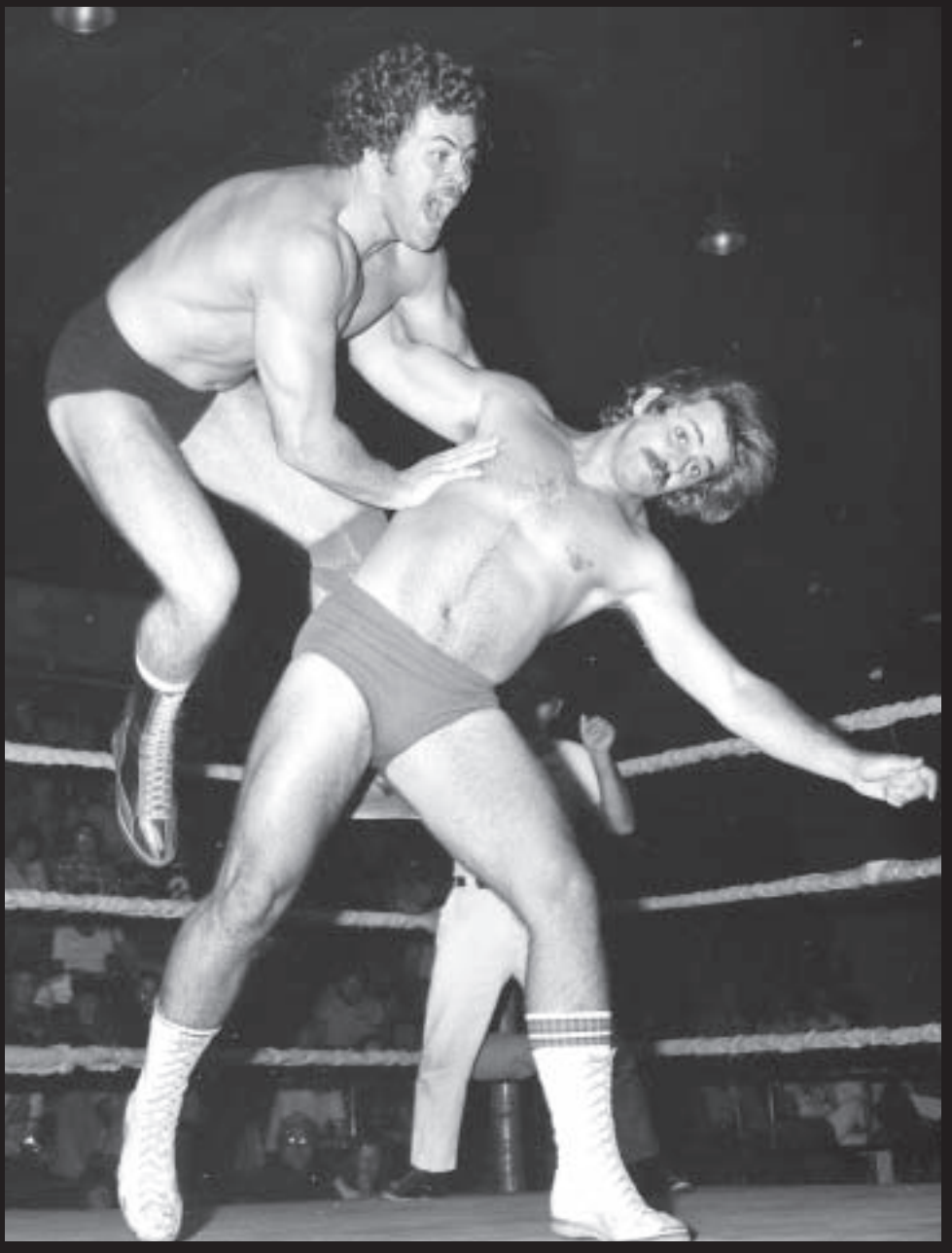
The incident erupted over a parking ticket. Keith had been skiing in nearby Whitefish with Smith's wife, Maria, and had an argument with the police when he returned to find them ticketing his Porsche. Maria exacerbated things by calling the police "pigs" and, as the situation escalated, the officers decided to throw Keith in the slammer for the night. When they tried to handcuff the wrestler, Keith resisted and a struggle ensued.

As Keith sat in jail with a drooling drunk as his cellmate, waiting to face a judge in the morning, he began to fret. "Oh, God, what am I doing here? How will I explain this to Dad? I'm supposed to be the commonsensical son. How did things get so out of whack?" To make matters worse, he had recently been hired by the Calgary Fire Department and was still on probation. He worried this incident might end his fledgling career.

Keith's fears were laid to rest the next day at the courthouse. "How's your dad doing?" asked the judge, who wore a bolo tie and steel-toed cowboy boots. "Where's Dave Ruhl these days?" The judge turned to the arresting officers and chastised them: "You guys be careful who you're arresting next time." Keith was speechless as the bitter authorities turned him loose.

Stampede Wrestling was a cult hit in the most unlikely pockets of the globe, but within the confines of its western Canadian territory – and the odd American state where the promotion's long arm reached – it was a full-fledged cultural institution. Grandfathers who had been following the action for decades sat and watched the show with their grandsons. Schoolboys followed the testosterone-fuelled soap opera religiously. They talked excitedly about the ongoing feuds. They spouted off Ed Whalen's catchphrases. They rough-housed at recess, playing Stampede Wrestling the same way they might play Cowboys and Indians or Star Wars.

Laurie Mills, sixty-six, a former CBC announcer and chairman of the Calgary Boxing and Wrestling Commission, remembers creeping through cattle pens at the Edmonton Exhibition Grounds and climbing up on the roof of the Sales Pavilion to sneak into the arena and watch the matches. A tall, skinny kid, Mills was picked on by bullies until he convinced them he was related to the fearsome Mills Brothers, Al and Tiny. Everyone in the schoolyard



A Keith Hart hip-toss sends Hubert Gallant flying, early 1980s.

knew who they were and, once the rumour got around, nobody picked on little Laurie again.

Stampede Wrestling had become a long-standing tradition, a crucial part of the pop culture diet for generations of western Canadians. Every Saturday afternoon when the show aired, Helen Hart was up in the office fielding a steady stream of phone calls. "If a wrestler appears hurt, fans want to make sure he is okay," wrote a *Calgary Herald* columnist. "If the referee makes an unpopular decision, fans phone in to complain. Helen, in fact, seldom gets to see the show. All she sees is the business end of a telephone."[9]

The Hart boys were a big part of the show's appeal, helping develop a female following for the show, says Tonia Fanella of Calgary's Glenbow Museum. "My best friend had a crush on Keith Hart," she says. "The fact that Stu had very attractive sons that he put in wrestling tights definitely helped market the product, from the schoolgirls who had crushes on them to the groupies who I heard used to hang out at BJ's Gym."

Stu's contributions to the community were more than mere entertainment, however. He was also committed to charity work, raising thousands of dollars for charitable organizations, including the United Way, the Salvation Army, and the Alberta Children's Hospital.

Stampede Wrestling was part of the cultural fabric not only in the western cities. Stu never forgot the small towns. He knew they held a devoted section of Stampede Wrestling's fan base and that it was often difficult for the townsfolk to get to the cities. Whenever he could, Stu brought the show to them, constantly sending his circus to small towns and Indian reserves across the Prairies – places such as Swift Current, Camrose, Rosetown, Hobbema, Hanna, and Onion Lake.

The crew hit Drumheller, eighty miles northeast of Calgary, a few times year. A remote stretch of canyons and hoodoos known as the badlands, the area is famous as a rich reserve of dinosaur bones. On such visits, the older wrestlers would wind up the rookies, telling them that Stu was born in Drumheller and that the town had erected a statue in his honour. The young pups got out their cameras, eager to snap a photo of this rare monument to a wrestler. The boys would crack up when the van passed by the giant Tyrannosaurus Rex statue in the centre of the town. If that didn't look like an angry Stu, what did?[10]

"Stu and Helen helped build up these small town communities," says Alison Hart. "My mother would phone the mayor's office and say, 'We'd like to bring Stampede Wrestling in. If you let us perform in your arena, we'll give you a certain percentage of the gate.' If three hundred people came out, the town ended up with a fair bit of money."

The irony is that despite the valuable cultural contribution Stampede Wrestling and the Hart family made in the West, they rarely got their due, at least not until Bret and Owen found worldwide fame in the United States as part of the WWF. Stampede Wrestling may have been an institution, but it was not the sort of thing Calgary, an image-conscious city that was moving up in the world, necessarily wanted to trumpet.

Pro wrestling was never treated as a sport by most people. Hardcore fans may have lapped it up, but most serious, upstanding folks viewed it as a *Gong Show* put on by screaming, overgrown clowns. Even as entertainers, pro wrestlers were rarely afforded as much respect as strippers by the moral majority. Wrestling was seen as lowbrow entertainment, organized buffoonery, something to laugh at and little more.

"You had the mucky-muck types, and they tended to look down on it," says Stu's friend, casino owner Frank Sisson. "It was not the in thing to enjoy wrestling. It was thought of as an embarrassment. You would hear people say, 'I don't watch that stuff.' They could turn around and tell you about every match.... But they'd never admit it."

But wrestling wasn't just blue-collar entertainment. Local businessmen attended the shows regularly, though they tried to keep it under their hats, like a dirty little secret. "Wrestling always bordered on the seamy side of life," says Glenn Ruhl, son of wrestler Dave Ruhl. "It was an institution ... but it was only begrudgingly accepted. It was never quite respectable."

To hell with those mucky-mucks. There's no shortage of prominent Albertans who grew up weaned on Stampede Wrestling. Among them was Alberta premier Ralph Klein, son of wrestler Phil "Killer" Klein. When he was a boy, Ralph sold wrestling programs at the Edmonton matches. "My grandfather was a huge fan, absolutely, and so was my uncle, who was a good friend of Dave Ruhl's," Ralph says. "I used to watch it with them. [Stampede Wrestling] was synonymous with Alberta."

Another distinguished devotee was Ted Hellard, now president of the CFL's Calgary Stampeders. On Friday nights, he accompanied his father and brothers to the Pavilion for the wrestling matches. "Our family didn't have a lot of money," Hellard told the *Calgary Herald.* "If there had been a Calgary Flames then, we couldn't have afforded to go to the games. What we did do was go to Stampede Wrestling. My dad and I, we'd sit right down by the ring, scream and pound the mat while Dave Ruhl fought Archie Gouldie. It was so great.... It was something we could share together."[11]

Hellard, now fifty-one, has stated his prime inspiration for revamping

the flagging football franchise is Stampede Wrestling. He wants Calgary Stampeders games to offer the same bonding family experience he had as a child at wrestling matches.

"I got caught up in the wrestling because it was theatre at its finest," says Hellard. "It was an honest form of entertainment.... [The wrestlers] were creating characters, of course, just like any actor, but it felt genuine."

Edmonton Journal sports editor Richard Helm watched *Stampede Wrestling* religiously every Saturday afternoon as a farm boy in Eston, Saskatchewan. "As a kid then you didn't have Xbox or a computer or the rich variety of TV programs that kids do today," Helm says. "But every Saturday afternoon, you had this incredible drama with comedy, violence, and heroics – as much as you could fit into a young person's life in an hour."

Gord Gillies, news anchor at Calgary's Global TV, remembers thinking that the wrestlers were part of the community. Gillies and his friends pestered Tor Kamata at the restaurant the villain opened near Gillies's childhood home: "We'd stick our heads in the door and say, 'No-o-o-o-o chancee!' Then we'd take off running."

For young Tony Spoletini, Stampede Wrestling was part of his Saturday ritual. "You got up, had breakfast, watched cartoons, and then it was Stampede Wrestling in the afternoon," says the former Calgary Stampeder and co-owner of Spolumbos, a trendy Cowtown deli. "It was part of our culture. It was just something we did.... Then, once high school hit, you'd go to the matches. Especially during Calgary Stampede time, when Stu brought in all the big cards. I don't think the Calgary Stampede ever had a better draw. Not even the chuckwagons. Stu brought people [to the Stampede grounds] probably more than any other event....

"The Harts were like Calgary's version of the Royal Family."

Chapter fourteen

Bad News Rising

The crowd scattered in terror like the Japanese fleeing Godzilla. Women screamed and children cried as Bad News Allen leapt from the ring to destroy another wrestler. A fourteen-year-old girl who had been standing on her chair for a better view was knocked to the ground amid the scramble, tearing ligaments in her leg. Police officers on the scene declared it a "potentially dangerous situation" and called for backup as the sirens of an approaching ambulance wailed. Stampede Wrestling fans were used to wild, violent scenes. They were well accustomed to those moments where the action spilled from the ring, when the battle raged into the stands. But they had never experienced anything as out of control as this.

It was December 2, 1983, at the Victorian Pavilion. Fans knew they were in for a war when they flocked to the arena for the main event. It was a triple tag team match pitting Bret Hart; Davey Boy Smith; and the mohawk-sporting Iroquois Sonny Two Rivers against Archie "The Stomper" Gouldie, who had recently returned to the territory; his rookie son, Jeff; and the barbaric Bad News Allen. A bald, bearded black man who, in the words of one reporter, looked like "Mr. T's bigger, meaner brother,"[1] Allen had emerged in the previous year and a half as the most devastating heel in the territory, his style a mixture of wrestling, martial arts, and lawless street fighting.

As expected, the December 2 battle was vicious, with the babyface contingent taking a hellish beating. But this time, before they could launch their

Bad News Allen flies at a bloodied Bret Hart off the top turnbuckle like a bat out of hell, 1983.

inevitable comeback, a dark cloud fell over the arena. With the help of wrestler Kerry Brown and Allen's Japanese manager, the shrieking "Shogun warrior" K.Y. Wakamatsu, Bad News perpetrated a double cross on the Gouldies. The Stomper was beaten with Wakamtsu's kendo stick and calf-roped to the ring post while Bad News raked a fork across his head, opening up a gory gash. He then gave The Stomper's son a piledriver outside the ring, the young whelp's body driven like a nail headfirst into the concrete floor. Surely his neck would be broken.

An outraged elderly man burst from the crowd and punched Bad News in the ribs. "His hair was pure white, he must have been eighty years old, but I didn't see him and he almost doubled me over," Allen says. "I grabbed him by the hair and started shaking him."

"Listen, you old bastard!" Allen said. "Your ticket gives you the right to scream and yell at me, but it don't give you the right to put your hands on me! You do it again and I'll kill you!" To further punctuate his point, the six-foot-two, 265-pound wrestler grabbed the man's cane and tossed it into the bleachers. People fled in panic.

Horrified, Ed Whalen ordered the camera man to stop filming, as he often did when the bouts got too violent. When the filming resumed, however, chaos still reigned. The crowd had turned into a fearful mob, milling about frantically. Shouts flew, as did a few chairs, while Security held a rampaging Stomper at bay as he tried to rush the ring, where Bad News was being interviewed by a fuming Whalen.

"Take a look at this man!" raged Allen, pointing at The Stomper. "Take a look at his son. I crippled him! I broke his neck! I helped him die!" Again the filming stopped.

By the time filming had once more resumed, the Pavilion had cleared out. Following such high-pitched craziness, the silence in the arena was ominous. A shaken Whalen stood with The Stomper, whose head was bloody and bandaged. Gouldie was hunched over the ropes, his head bowed in shame, and he expressed regret at bringing his son into the wrestling business. "He begged me," The Stomper said sombrely, his eyes on the verge of tears. "He said, 'Dad, I wanna follow in your footsteps … I wanna come wrestle in front of my gramma up in our home in Western Canada.' So I brought him up here. I'm not real proud of that, Ed."

Fans were used to Gouldie ranting like a madman. The contrast of his pained, sorrowful delivery on this night was riveting, then chilling, when he glared at the camera and vowed revenge. "It's time to get even. I'm going to get that man who hurt my son."

From the chaos of the audience turned mob to The Stomper's uncharacteristic vulnerability, everything about the show seemed to have derailed. Little boys across the Prairies watched Stampede Wrestling weekly, on the edge of their seats, assured by the grown-ups that the action was fake. But everything about this match deviated from the norm. Even the adults seemed disturbed by what they had witnessed. It all seemed so frighteningly real.

Then came the kicker. Whalen told viewers he refused to be part of such an ugly spectacle any longer and quit the show on the spot. He signed off for what he said would be the last time, hung his microphone over the ropes, and walked off camera. Uncle Ed, the Voice of Stampede Wrestling, was gone. Whalen had quit before, but never on the air like this. That settled it. It had to be real.

It wasn't. Bruce Hart had cooked up the twisted saga, designed to fill arenas across Western Canada for months to come. Jeff Gouldie's neck wasn't really broken. For that matter, he wasn't really Jeff Gouldie. This was no child of The Stomper. His real name was Tommy Dalton, and he was a nineteen-year-old rookie from Georgia.

The whole scene was a Hart creation – the set-up of what was to be the feud of the century – Archie the Stomper, terror of the 1970s versus Bad News Allen, the scourge of the '80s. It was a brilliant angle that the beasts sold with such brutal precision it backfired. Everybody, even the most jaded skeptics, bought into the drama. Including Whalen, who hadn't been in on the plot twist.

"The angle got so damn far over that people just went nuts," remembers Bruce Hart. "It became an Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* type thing." Indeed. The mini-riot in the Pavilion was only the start of the promotion's troubles. The Calgary Boxing and Wrestling Commission suspended Stu's operating licence in the city for the remainder of the year and decreed that he would have to deposit a $10,000 performance bond before his permit was reissued in 1984. Bad News Allen was fined $1,000 and suspended from wrestling in Calgary indefinitely. During an Edmonton match the following evening, Allen's antics sparked another riot, and a pregnant woman in the audience was injured. Allen was banned from yet another city.

The Calgary incident was the talk of the town. Headlines in the *Calgary Herald* screamed, "Promoter Faces Suspension in War on Wrestling Violence" and "Bad News on the Wrestling Scene."[2] Glenbow Museum archivist Tonia Fanella, a student at the time, recalls the University of Calgary campus buzzing over the controversial match. Some fans even called Calgary hospitals to find out the condition of The Stomper's son. As no Jeff Gouldie was admitted

anywhere, it was whispered in some circles that Stu hustled the boy out of town, not wanting a death in his territory.[3]

Despite the bedlam at the Pavilion, Keith doesn't think the controversy would have gotten so out of control had it not been for Whalen's reaction. Ed was a pillar of the community, people believed in him, and when he got spooked, so did the fans. "The whole city believed it, including Ed," Keith says. "Ed became a total mark.... He lost it. We probably should have taken him aside and told him, 'This is what we're going to do. Don't panic.' We figured he'd been doing it for so long, he wouldn't react that way. But he got hysterical. There was so much heat, and everybody just spun out off Ed's hysteria."

But Whalen, who was now also working as a play-by-play announcer for the Calgary Flames, stood by his decision. "I won't degrade myself anymore," he said the day after the riot. "It used to be fun announcing this show, but now it's obscenity. We're starting to scare the patrons with this violence outside the ring, and I will not be associated with it anymore. I feel sick."[4]

Stu, barred from staging any wrestling events in Calgary for the remainder of '83, had a boiling-hot grudge match on his stove and nowhere to serve it. His solution – to take the show to the Seven Chiefs Sportsplex on the Sarcee Indian Reserve, just outside Calgary – seemed resourceful. The reserve, as federal jurisdiction, was not bound by the rules of the city's boxing and wrestling commission.

But the Sarcee matches were a bust. Most fans didn't want to travel outside the city in the dead of winter. They were accustomed to the Stampede grounds. Stu organized a bus service to transport fans to the Sportsplex, but he still couldn't fill the venue. The Saturday night card, featuring Gouldie and Allen – joined at the wrist by a leather strap, which was used alternately as a whip and noose – was sparsely attended.

Another thing keeping people away was the absence of Ed Whalen. In a surprising turn of events, Stu patched up his differences with Sam Menacker, the announcer who had been such a boon to the business back in the 1950s. At first, given his track record, Stu and Helen had high hopes for Menacker. At Hart House, they presented him with a cake, the phrase "Play it again, Sam" written with icing.[5]

But the charismatic ideas man of yesteryear, now pushing seventy years old, was washed up. He had been out of the business for at least a decade and out of touch with the modern wrestling world. His commentating was lethargic, and he had trouble keeping up with the action in the ring. Half

the time he couldn't remember the wrestlers' names. Only the oldest of fans remembered Menacker. The name meant nothing to the younger crowd, who missed Whalen.

The month of December was a disaster for Stampede Wrestling. Stu lost up to $300,000 because of the December 2 fiasco and the resulting fines and suspensions.[6]

Gouldie began to get antsy. His final run in Stampede Wrestling had been a wild one. The Stomper even got Stu, then sixty-nine, back into the ring in a tag team match in which Bret and his father faced off against Gouldie and J.R. Foley. Stu suffered cracked ribs when Foley stomped on him with his cowboy boots, but Bret says his dad loved it. "The glory was all coming back," he says with a grin. "Stu thought he was on the Ho Chi Minh Trail!" Even so, Gouldie felt he was on a sinking ship, and he turned in his notice, never to wrestle in the territory again.

Stu continued to fight the boxing and wrestling commission, arguing it was punishing his entire business for the actions of one rogue wrestler. "It's damn severe," he told reporters. "They've taken my livelihood from me." He publicly condemned Allen's actions. "I haven't officially kicked [Bad News] out yet, but I just can't abide this," Stu told the *Calgary Herald*.[7]

Privately, Stu blasted Allen too, but the irritable wrestler was having none of it. He says the entire Hart family supported the plot twist to "cripple" Stomper's son, including Stu. Allen had already been besieged by fines and suspensions in that year, and he claims he was reluctant to do the angle, thinking it would land him in the doghouse yet again. "Stu went to the press because he was the babyface promoter and he had to make it look like it was all my fault," Allen says. "But when I called him up and he started ranting and raving, I said, 'Listen, Stu, you were standing right next to me when I told those guys I didn't want to do this.'"

Stu grumbled, "I didn't hear it."

"Oh, all of a sudden you're deaf? I can see you doing this for the press, Stu, but don't you come down on me now. You know damn well it was your son Bruce who wanted to do this nonsense!"

Although Allen felt he was the scapegoat for the angle gone bad, behind the scenes it was Bruce who took most of the heat. Keith defends his brother: "My dad blamed Bruce for killing the business at that point. Bruce was the one who orchestrated the whole thing, but it could have saved Stampede Wrestling. They could've made enough money that Bruce might have earned my dad's respect. Then they could have turned the business over to him. Everybody would have lived happily ever after.... Instead, Ed quit and we got banished."

Spring 2004. I'm sitting in Bad News Allen's living room, face to face with the man who once decimated my childhood idols, Bret Hart and Dynamite Kid. Not an hour earlier, before I made my way across town for the interview, I joked to my wife, "If I'm not home in about three hours, call the police. Tell them I'm at this address." She looked at me as if I were a fool. But she doesn't understand the awesome presence this man once was – how for a whole generation of kids he was the ultimate symbol of tough and mean; pain and destruction; hell, all things nasty.

Of course, there's nothing to be intimidated by. That would be ridiculous. Allen Coage is not really the fierce killing machine I once watched on TV. Nevertheless, I sense it's best to tread carefully when interviewing him. I ask the tough questions, but I phrase them as politely as one possibly can when asking about bloodletting.

Allen is a serious man, cordial but not overly friendly. He has a hard, penetrating gaze and zero tolerance for BS. About three years before this interview, I was shocked when I pulled up to a gas bar and he filled my tank. When I told him I was a fan, he met me with a look that made it clear he didn't wish to talk to any fans. Now he is a security guard, teaching judo and wrestling on the side. He's still not interested in talking to fans. But a writer, that's a different story. If someone's going to be writing about Bad News Allen, he wants his say.

Allen walks with a limp. His knees were replaced a few years back after decades of pounding in the ring, but the arthritis in his joints still bothers him. Wrestling is no longer an option. There's a touch of grey in his beard, the odd wrinkle or two in his brow, but other than that the man has hardly aged. At sixty, he's solidly muscular, the last guy you'd want to bump into in a back alley. But it's when Allen begins his tale that he warms up considerably.

Although he was billed as a Harlem street fighter in the wrestling biz, Allen was raised in Queens. He didn't waste much time street fighting; from his early teens on, he devoted himself to the study of judo. It was his true love, and he dedicated about twenty years to the art, earning his fifth-degree black belt. He went on to win multiple championships, most significantly, two gold medals at the Pan American Games in 1967 and 1975 and a bronze medal at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal. By then, he was thirty-two years old and decided he had taken his judo career to its peak. "I filled my scrapbook," he says. "Now I was out to fill my bank book."

When his judo coach suggested he try his hand at pro wrestling, Allen bristled. "I don't wanna do that phoney stuff," he replied. But his coach

wasn't talking about North American wrestling. He wanted to send Allen to Antonio Inoki's New Japan promotion. The Japanese style was far more serious than that of the Americans. They trained hard, they hit harder, and there was a greater emphasis on athleticism as opposed to showmanship. By late 1977, Allen was wrestling professionally throughout Japan.

In 1978, Allen went to the WWWF to wrestle for Vince McMahon Sr. He learned the value of showmanship by watching veteran wrestler Classy Freddie Blassie, whose catchphrase insult "pencil neck geek" was so hot that Blassie recorded a song titled after the phrase. "Freddie told me, if you wanna be remembered in this business, come up with a saying that nobody else uses," Allen says.

In his travels, Allen met the Hart boys and Dynamite Kid, appearing on the same cards as them in Japan and during a trip through the Middle East in 1982. Allen instantly disliked the way the Harts did business. "The Japanese are very punctual," he says. "If they say they're gonna be somewhere at five, they're there at four-thirty. But the Harts, they have no concept of time. They're always late. Keith and Bret used to make the Japanese so upset.... I'd say, 'Listen, you're really pissing the office off.' They didn't care."

It was Dynamite Kid who first approached Allen about working in Calgary. He saw potential in Allen's athleticism and intensity and recognized that a heel of his stature would do great business for Stampede Wrestling. Allen wasn't so sure. The New Japan office cautioned him about Stu's territory, about the erratic business and the crazy ribs the wrestlers played on one another. One of Allen's Japanese handlers phoned Stu and warned him that Allen would not take kindly to any nasty pranks. If anyone messed with Bad News they were sure to get hurt. Stu probably thought his territory could use such a man. He arranged to bring Bad News Allen in for the Calgary Stampede mega-card in July 1982. Allen was irked from the get-go: Stu picked him up at the airport half an hour late.

As Dynamite predicted, Bad News was good news for the territory – at least at first. He crushed the competition week after week, developing a loud, aggressive persona in interviews. Recalling the advice of Freddie Blassie, he invented his own catchphrase, an insult tailor-made for the Prairie audience: "Listen, you beer bellied sharecroppers...!" Another Stampede Wrestling expression entered the pop culture lexicon of the West.

Allen's first major Stampede feud was with Bret Hart. The two wrestlers had their share of knockdown, drag-out brawls that the fans loved, but Allen and Bret didn't see eye to eye on business. Allen's approach was in line with the punishing Japanese style of wrestling. When he hit, he hit hard.

The devastating power of Bad News Allen and the aerial skills of Dynamite Kid is evident here as Dynamite flies, shot through the air by Bad News.

Bret didn't work that way. He too wanted the matches to look as legitimate as possible but believed the art of wrestling lay not in steamrolling one's opponent but in putting on an exciting exhibition where both men walked away looking like million-dollar warriors. That's what made the matches exciting for fans. He and Allen constantly clashed. "He would eat you alive," Bret says. "If you went in with him dressed as a nine, you came out a one. You never came out looking better than you did going in, and that's no way to build up a main event. Bad News Allen had no ring psychology.... He was a meat-chopper."

Wrestler Gama Singh remembers a match between the two in Regina where the story had Bret run into the ring and hit Bad News across the back with a kendo stick. Bret did as they had planned, but instead of acting as if the shot were devastating, Bad News snatched the stick away, threw Hart to the canvas, and pressed the bamboo shaft across his throat. Gama remembers Bret's bitter comment after the match: "I came in a rose and left smelling like a piece of shit."

Allen thought Bret was a prima donna, always having his hand raised in victory because he was the boss's brat. If Bret didn't like a storyline, Allen says, he'd sulk and refuse to cooperate. Allen recalls one angle where he stabbed Bret in the eye with a fork. To make it look real, Bret was supposed to wear the eye patch around town for a week. "He refused to do it," Allen says. "I said, 'Why'd we even do the damn [angle] then?' He was hard to do business with."

Given their relationship, Allen took pleasure in defying Bret every chance he got. Once, when Allen was holding the North American Heavyweight belt, he was to lose the title to Bret. Instead, he dropped it to Davey Boy Smith in some small town, when none of the Harts was present. Not even Davey knew it was coming. When he covered Allen for the pin, the wrestler was supposed to kick free but didn't. Before Davey knew what was going on, he had his arm raised in victory.

The next night, in Regina, Ross and Bret approached Allen, telling him he was to lose the belt that evening to Bret. "I started laughing and said, 'That's impossible. I'm not the champ anymore. Davey's the champ.'"

Allen grins from ear to ear remembering the moment. "Bret was marching around. Man, he was hot."

If Bret and Bad News couldn't work together, Dynamite Kid was queued up and ready. The trouble was, both men were heels. For a feud to really take off, one of them had to turn babyface.

Dynamite was the clear choice. By 1983, he looked like a comic book superhero – 218 pounds of lean, steroid-pumped muscle in tights that seemed to fly across the ring at his foes. Occasionally, the fans would catch themselves cheering for him even though they weren't supposed to. But Dynamite's character was so irrevocably linked with the despicable J.R. Foley that casting him as a good guy was going to be tricky. The easy way out would have been to stage a dispute between Dynamite and Foley. Instead, Bruce found a way to make old J.R. vaguely sympathetic.

First, he introduced the shrieking Wakamatsu to the fold as J.R.'s lieutenant. A short Japanese man in a karate suit, Wakamatsu spoke barely a word of English, but his approach – a sneaky assassin, barking insanely in his native tongue – made the fans loathe him. As Wakamatsu became more wicked and lethal by the week, Foley increasingly became the comedy relief.

J.R.'s supposedly rich, spoiled son, Athol, was introduced to the fold around this time. A wimp, who constantly whined to his daddy about corruption in the Hart mafia, Athol – actually a very capable British wrestler named Bernie Wright – originally appeared as a younger clone of his father, complete with his own Hitler-style moustache. As his character developed, he grew a beard and cut his hair to look like Mr. T, the tough-talking muscleman of the hit TV series *The A-Team*. This looked asinine on a young Englishman. Enhancing his reputation as the village idiot were Athol's mixed-gender matches with female wrestler Wendy Richter, who beat and humiliated him.

Perhaps the cherry on top of the Athol sundae were the trunks he sometimes wore, which resembled a diaper. He became an object of ridicule for the fans, who gleefully chanted "Asshole! Asshole!" each time he came to the ring. This caused Athol to jump up and down and stamp his feet like a child throwing a tantrum. With J.R. dedicating his energies to Athol's progress, Wakamatsu, as per the story, established himself as the devious brain behind Bad News Allen.

Things came to a head one Friday night when Wakamatsu and Allen double-crossed Foley, laying into the old Englishman with a nasty beating. Dynamite Kid rushed to his friend's aid and banished the bad guys as the crowd pounded on the bleachers, chanting excitedly "Dy-na-mite! Dy-na-mite!" The Kid was a hero. The stage was set for a Dynamite–Bad News feud.

Although Bruce Hart is usually blamed for the bloody excesses of the 1980s, he had little to do with the Dynamite–Bad News feud, among the most controversial of the time. That's because Stu cut Bruce out of the action. According to Allen, Stu said, "You and Dynamite are professional enough

The Japanese warlord K.Y. Wakamatsu brings his kendo stick down on a felled grappler outside the ring.

that you can do your own matches. Don't listen to Bruce." Allen recalls that the first time Dynamite and Bad News clashed, in Regina, Bruce tried to orchestrate the match's finish, telling him he was to defeat Dynamite that evening. "We got two things going here," Allen snapped. "One, I ain't beating him. And two, get the hell out of here. We're in charge of our own matches. We don't need you."

In the ring, Bad News and Dynamite were of like mind. Bad News liked to play rough and so did Dynamite Kid. "That's the way Tommy and I approached it," Allen says. "He'd really lay in with the chops and the punches and I would do the same. When the audience saw it, they thought, 'This is the real thing.'"

Dynamite in particular paid little heed to safety, and his body suffered for it. "Tommy was more dangerous to himself than anybody else," says Gama Singh. "I remember one time he dove off the ring's top corner post onto the cement floor, where he gave Bruce a flying headbutt. The whole impact of the move was absorbed by his elbows, shoulders, and knees. There's no give on a cement floor. The next day, Tommy could barely walk. He was never afraid to do risky moves like that."

In Dynamite, Bad News had an opponent perfectly willing to take anything, and the former Olympian took full advantage of the situation. In one match, the brawl spilled out into the stands. Bad News smashed open the glass compartment encasing the fire extinguisher, pummelling Dynamite with the heavy metal object. Next, he slammed the blood-covered Dynamite onto a wooden ringside table and picked up a fire-axe. "I told him, 'Make sure you move, 'cause I ain't gonna stop with this thing.'" Dynamite remembers Bad News towering over him, brandishing the weapon, a maniacal look in his eyes. He rolled out of the way just as Allen buried the axe in the spot where he had laid. That was the first time the Calgary Boxing and Wrestling Commission suspended Bad News.

The feud between the two warriors spilled outside the ring one evening in Vancouver. The wrestlers were staying in a dive hotel off Granville Street. A wet T-shirt contest was being held in its bar. Surly Allen didn't drink and didn't like bars, but on this night an excited Wakamatsu convinced Allen to accompany him. Allen knew it was a mistake when he entered the bar and saw a group of wrestlers, including Dynamite, already drunk. He and Dynamite were wrestling in town as enemies, so it wouldn't do for them to be seen together at a bar. Allen turned to leave when Dynamite saw him and began hurling insults for the benefit of the barflies. Lit up on booze, Dynamite ran across the bar and shoved Allen. Allen grabbed Tommy and threw him,

knocking over a table full of drinks. The next thing Allen knew, he and Wakamatsu were being jumped by a mob of drunken fans who thought they were rescuing Dynamite Kid. The two wrestlers were lucky to escape the bar in one piece.

The next day, Allen spotted a hungover Dynamite Kid crawling into the tour van. Allen grabbed him. "Listen, Tommy, the next time you pull a stunt like that I'm gonna beat your brains out," he said, seething. "You could've gotten me stabbed. What the hell's wrong with you?"

"I was just trying to drum up business," Dynamite replied groggily. Even he wasn't about to take on Allen for real.

With the Dynamite–Bad News war, Stu had box office gold on his hands and a suspension would not do. After much negotiating with the commission, the promoter managed to get the suspension lifted on the promise he would better control his wrestlers. But the violence only got worse. In one match, Allen gashed open Dynamite's head with a broken bottle. Again he was suspended.

Ed Whalen was becoming increasingly agitated at the direction the show was taking and the Calgary Boxing and Wrestling Commission began coming down on Stu for any infraction it could find. Fines and suspensions were issued on a weekly basis. Some of the commission's complaints were reasonable, such as those about fighting in the audience. What if a fan was hurt? But coming down on the wrestlers about the use of weapons in the ring and beating up referees was unreasonable. Although Stu would never go so far as to admit the violence was largely an act, he did tell the *Calgary Herald*, "You can't run wrestling on Olympic rules."[8] Most of the commission members were well aware that what they were seeing was entertainment rather than a straight-up sporting contest. Gordon Grayston, chairman of the Calgary Boxing and Wrestling Commission, certainly knew it, as he had worked as a Stampede Wrestling referee for years.

Grayston argued that the violence would have a negative influence on children, who might mimic what they saw on TV. But with that rationale, pro wrestling would have to be stopped altogether. Or, at least, all the dirty play would have to be taken out of the game, and that would rob the show of its drama, effectively neutering Stampede Wrestling.

Bruce Hart rebelled against the commission every chance he got. He went so far as to introduce a snivelling, dictatorial referee to the show who he named after Ron Hayter, the chairman of the Edmonton commission. Stu thought this was just asking for trouble and didn't want Bruce to introduce the angle. Bruce did it anyway.

In a letter sent to Calgary City Council on May 17, 1982, Stu protested the city's boxing and wrestling commission, arguing it was "openly hostile to [Stampede Wrestling]."[9] He told reporters the commission was trying to run him out of business. As Stu saw it, the root of his problem was Grayston. Stu and Gordon went all the way back to the navy, where Grayston had made a name for himself boxing, just as Stu had wrestling. According to Alison Hart, Grayston and Stu got into a fight on the base in Cornwallis, Nova Scotia, while Grayston was refereeing one of Stu's navy matches, and Stu knocked Grayston out cold. Stu always said that was the beginning of Grayston's deep-seated grudge against him.

In the 1960s, Grayston tried to start up a boxing promotion in Calgary. When that failed, Stu lent him money and hired him as a referee. Many of the Harts believe that Grayston was always envious of Stu's success. When he became chairman of the boxing and wrestling commission, he saw it as an opportunity to settle old scores.[10]

Former commission member Laurie Mills says he never saw any evidence that Grayston had such an agenda. He does admit that a few overly conservative people on the commission "wanted to prevent anything that would make wrestling work," but he maintains Grayston was not one of them.

The Harts weren't the only ones who had a problem with Grayston. In an interview with the *Calgary Herald* after the December 2, 1983, debacle, Bad News Allen accused the commission of discrimination, claiming that white wrestlers who used extreme violence were not punished as harshly as he was. Allen threatened to report it to the Alberta Human Rights Commission.[11]

"News would be the guy to pull that card," says Mills, adamant that Allen was in trouble for his actions, not the colour of his skin.

Around this time, Stu set up a meeting between Allen and Grayston to try to smooth things out. It only heightened tensions. "When I got there, [Grayston] said something and started pointing his finger at me. I told him to eff-off and walked out," Allen says. "After that, he tried to stick it to me every chance he got. He hated me with a passion."

There was similar animosity between Bad News and Whalen. Whalen so disapproved of Allen's style that he quit the show over it on December 2. As for Allen, he thought Whalen was bad for business. Whalen always got queasy at blood-soaked matches. He insisted that Ross Hart edit out anything Whalen deemed too nasty. It was common for highly anticipated matches to be cut off halfway through the action, the filming ordered stopped by Whalen. This often frustrated fans, as they missed the battles they were dying to see. It was especially hard for a grappler like Allen. Violence was his

stock-in-trade, and Whalen was censoring his best work.

Allen also hated the way Whalen ran the show, cutting certain wrestlers off, not letting them say their piece in interviews. "The bad guy is supposed to get everybody hot for next week's match," Allen says. "But if you got the announcer saying, 'I'm not gonna listen to this' and walking off, you're killing the business.... I think if Ed worked in any other territory, they would have fired him for the things he did."

But despite the dissension behind the scenes, one common theme seemed to unite many of the key players in the game. And that was that Bruce Hart was trouble. Whalen and Grayston disliked him for his bloody matches and his risqué concepts. Allen said it was ludicrous that Bruce booked himself as one of the stars of the show when he didn't have the mat skills to back it up. Bret thought Bruce was too disorganized and his booking concepts ill-conceived. Keith hated the way his brother played politics in the dressing room. "Bruce was a very Machiavellian character," Keith says. "What really did him in was his duplicity. He'd blow smoke up one guy's ass and knock the next guy, then he'd go to the next guy [and say the opposite]. He thrived on controversy and conflict. He manipulated people and in a small territory eventually guys would compare notes and then he'd have everybody pissed off." In Bruce's defence, complaints like these against the booker are all too common in the wrestling business.

Stu too had reservations about his ambitious son. He hated the way Bruce defied orders and he thought his son's concepts often robbed the sport of the dignity Stu believed it had.

Many thought that as a manager Bruce was a disaster, which was a shame since his booking concepts were often spectacular. From the hardcore action to the fast-paced fliers to the absurd scenarios, Bruce, with a low budget, was moving in the direction that characterizes today's typical wrestling program. He really did envision the future.

But on December 2, 1983, Bruce lost control of the wheel. His crazy concepts seemed to be steering Stampede Wrestling right off the proverbial cliff.

Could rock 'n' roll save Stampede Wrestling's soul? In 1984, it looked like it might, and following the crisis of December '83, the promotion certainly was in need of saving. The wrestling business was becoming more competitive than ever. Vince McMahon Jr. had taken over his father's World Wrestling Federation in the spring of 1983 and was already using his financial clout to poach stars from other promotions. There was also much money to be made

in Japan and in the booming American territories. To hang on to top stars like Dynamite Kid and Bad News Allen, Stu was paying them about $1,500 a week, plus picking up their expenses on the road. Furthermore, the Stampede Wrestling payroll was unnecessarily long for a small business. Most of Stu's kids, not to mention their spouses, were collecting a paycheque from the organization for a variety of menial tasks.

A valiant attempt had been made to boost business. Exciting new stars were introduced, including good-looking babyfaces Phil Lafleur from Montreal and Alison Hart's husband, Ben Bassarab; high-flying masked man The Cobra; the Mongolian giant, Killer Khan; and the Iroquois, Sonny Two Rivers, who was actually from Japan.* Southern scrapper "Rotten" Ron Starr, a former Vietnam veteran from Mobile, Alabama, was another hot addition to the roster. "[Starr] was a real slimeball," says Bret. "I remember the fans spitting at him and he'd catch the spit in his mouth, spit it back into the air, and catch it in his mouth again. It would just make you sick." Starr was an excellent heel and the fans longed to see his gruff, smug face covered in blood.

The wild feud between Dynamite and News was also resurrected. On a card in the spring, Dynamite's eight-month-pregnant wife, Michelle, was brought into the fray when the couple was honoured in the ring, announcer Sam Menacker presenting Michelle with a bouquet of flowers and gifts for the baby. Suddenly, depraved Bad News and his cronies showed up to offer congratulations of their own – a good stomping for Dynamite. Michelle seemed on the verge of a similar fate until she was rescued by the good guys. According to an outraged letter in the *Calgary Herald* screaming that "Bad News deserves the boot," Stu got in on the action, too, giving the villains "a few swift kicks in the butt."[12]

Despite such heady programming, TV ratings were down in Alberta and Saskatchewan. People missed Whalen – without him, the show had lost its flow – and, with all the negative publicity, there was significant ill will in the community toward Stampede Wrestling.

The show's saving grace was the invaluable beachhead that had been established in Vancouver thanks to Bruce Allen, a rock 'n' roll manager who had guided the stunningly successful careers of acts such as Bachman-Turner Overdrive and Loverboy. The aggressive Allen was only twenty-eight years old when he and his client, rising rock star Bryan Adams, first introduced

*"With that mohawk, he looked more like an Indian than an Indian did," says Bruce Hart of Two Rivers. "We'd go to all the reservations and the Indians loved him. They thought he was the real thing, oddly enough. In one place they even made him an honorary chief."

themselves to Davey Boy sometime in the fall of 1983 in the dressing room of Tokyo's Sumo Hall. *Stampede Wrestling* had been airing regularly in Vancouver for a couple of years at that point, and both men were fans. It was then that Allen first hinted he would be interested in doing promotions for Stampede Wrestling in Vancouver and Victoria.

For most of the 1970s, Stu stayed away from Vancouver, as that was the domain of All Star Wrestling, which Gene Kiniski had long co-promoted. But in 1977, Winnipeg wrestler Al Tomko bought into the promotion and Kiniski found himself with a partner he disliked.[13] Bitter, Gene quit the promotion, but not wanting to give up on his territory, approached Stu about co-promoting Stampede Wrestling in the heart of British Columbia. Stu was open to the idea, as All Star had been trying to establish a foothold in Calgary.

With its phenomenal roster, the *Stampede Wrestling* TV show was well received in Vancouver, the excitement of the Pavilion matches far outdoing All Star, which was recorded in front of a small studio audience. Stampede Wrestling cards were also doing fair business in Vancouver, although in a city of that size, Stu felt they should have done far better. Stu's men often felt demoralized, driving twelve hours to Vancouver for shows that were not well attended.

Bruce Allen thought Stampede Wrestling was far superior to All Star. Holding it back, he felt, was lack of promotion. The Harts, too, were dissatisfied with Kiniski's promoting efforts, which Ross claims usually amounted to a tiny advertisement in the newspaper.

Davey Boy passed Bruce Allen's message onto the Harts when he arrived back in Canada from Tokyo, and the rock manager met with Stu and Bruce. He offered to step in and promote two shows at his cost. He told the Harts that if there was no increase in attendance, he would walk away. If there was, he wanted to become a partner in the Vancouver-Victoria operations.

Bruce Allen was a tough businessman with a proven track record in the music industry. Still, Stu was leery. What did a rock manager know about wrestling? Allen's plans were promising, though, and he had media connections that couldn't be beat. Bruce saw the potential immediately and convinced Stu to give Allen a chance. Against Kiniski's wishes, Bruce Allen was cut into the action. He made a huge difference immediately. "It was incredible," says Ross. "He got a brewery as a sponsor and the rock radio station CFOX started doing on-air interviews with the wrestlers.... They hyped the matches and gave us an identity we didn't have before."

Under Bruce Allen, a Stampede Wrestling event took on the qualities of an arena rock concert, with music booming from the speakers and the house

lights down save for a spotlight on the wrestlers as they made their dramatic entrances to the ring. Stampede Wrestling was exploring the rock 'n' wrestling connection a good year before Vince McMahon popularized the concept by promoting the inaugural WrestleMania on MTV and bringing pop star Cyndi Lauper into the ring briefly as a manager. "We flourished," says Ross. "Suddenly instead of drawing five hundred people [for the Vancouver shows], seven thousand fans would show up." And the wrestlers were treated like rock stars. Under Bruce Allen, they stayed in a finer class of hotels than they were used to and catered food awaited them in the dressing room.

When Bruce Allen turned the business around so radically in Vancouver, Kiniski grew even more sour, feeling squeezed out of the operation. Ross confirms the Hart kids wanted to "put Gene out to pasture" by buying him out. It was Stu who stuck up for his old colleague. He argued that he had a thirty-year-plus relationship with the veteran, and he refused to renege on their co-promoting deal.

Following a match shortly after Bruce Allen started promoting, Allen came into the dressing room and, according to Stu, Kiniski grabbed him and threw him down a flight of stairs. Stu caught him at the bottom. "He didn't want to [go] back up," Stu told the Glenbow Museum. "Gene said he'd boot the hell out of him if he did. I got a hold of Gene and said, 'This fella has connections with the sports departments on radio and television everywhere. For you to throw that kind of money down the stairs …'"

"I like my privacy," Gene barked.

"Bruce Allen was really upset with that," Ross says. "He said to my dad, 'Why do you need this guy around?'" Still, Stu remained loyal to Kiniski.

Meanwhile, the two Bruces struck up a wildly popular plot line when they brought notorious NHL bruiser Tiger Williams to the ring in August 1984. Williams, who had just been traded to the Detroit Red Wings from the Vancouver Canucks, was called on to act as a celebrity referee one night. "Rotten" Ron Starr got to the microphone and hurled insults at Williams. A tough guy on the ice, Williams was not one to take such abuse and challenged Starr to a match.*

The feud culminated in a tag team bout on August 29, 1984, at Vancouver's Pacific Coliseum, pitting Tiger and Bruce Hart against the Rotten One and Gama Singh. Between 4,500 and 6,000 fans showed up for the match. Hart and Tiger came to the ring accompanied by three burly bodyguards from the B.C. Lions football team. Starr and Gama entered to the malicious

*This did not please the Red Wings' head office, which pulled Tiger's NHL insurance. Bruce Allen countered the problem by insuring the hockey star himself at a cost of $9,000.

chant "Go home, Paki! Go home, Paki!" being directed at the turban-wearing Gama. The racial slur had long been a popular feature of Gama's matches. Starr then took over the microphone and questioned the sexual preference of the football players. Thirty seconds into the contest, all four combatants were brawling at once in the centre of the ring. The epic battle finally ended, after many dramatic twists and turns, when Gama took a hockey stick and cross-checked Williams.[14]

Bruce Hart was elated. "The promotion has been very innovative," he told the Vancouver *Province* in an article about wrestling's newfound hipness, which referred to the sex appeal of the modern wrestler. "We're getting a younger, more vibrant audience."[15] Bruce felt he was leading the family business to great new heights in the 1980s, bringing it to the MTV generation with a blast. He knew he was standing on the brink of something great, just like his father thirty-six years earlier when he started the promotion. He felt he was fulfilling the Hart legacy and the world was his for the taking.

Two days later, he arrived back in Calgary and turned on the six o'clock news, hoping they'd promote that night's card at the Pavilion. Just like that it all came crashing down. Stu had sold his territory to Vince McMahon.

The promoting rights. Gone. The TV spots. Gone. The new, creative direction that was going to revitalize the family business, not to mention the whole goddamn wrestling industry. Gone.

How much of his life had Bruce given up? How big a chunk did this game rip from his heart? The endless politicking with his family, the tyrannical commissions, and Whalen, not to mention all the crazies who constantly came and went – it seemed as though the last decade had been a constant struggle for Bruce to see his creative vision played out. And now, on the cusp of greatness, to have it pulled away from him. Bruce thought he was going to explode. He could barely speak. He wasn't even clear as to what had gone down. He rushed to the Pavilion, where the wrestlers had assembled in the dressing room, equally confused.[16]

Immediately, Bruce got to the bottom of it. It was already apparent that McMahon's WWF juggernaut was out to conquer the wrestling world. McMahon was running one North American territory after another out of business, going head to head with the various promotions by getting his program onto TV screens in their respective regions. Independent promotions found it impossible to compete with McMahon's big-budget, star-heavy production and the territories were gradually folding. In hindsight, it was inevitable that McMahon would covet the wrestling-loving audience of Western

Canada. Perhaps because Stampede Wrestling was such a cultural institution in the region, McMahon approached Stu with an offer to buy him out, rather than aggressively trying to run him off the game board.

When the initial call came from Jim Barnett, McMahon's right-hand man, it could not have caught Stu at a more vulnerable, weary moment. Between his financial woes, Whalen's departure, and the never-ending war with the boxing and wrestling commission, as well as his constant back and forth with Bruce and the mess with Kiniski, Stu felt like he was being torn apart, pulled in a dozen directions at once. At the age of sixty-nine, did he really want to take on the juggernaut that was the WWF? He had only to look to Helen to know the answer to that question. Stu's Tiger Belle, who he loved more than anyone in the world, who he had dragged into this business as a reluctant participant, had just been diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. She would not fight any longer. She didn't have the strength.

"It was time to get off the treadmill," said Stu when news of the sale got out. "I owe it to my wife. She was on the treadmill, too. I'd hate to die knowing that I didn't get off."[17]

Stu and Helen knew Bruce would resist the sale every step of the way, so they kept him in the dark. Instead, they brought in Keith to help broker the deal. Bruce was on the road when Stu, Helen, and Keith met with George Scott, who had wrestled for Stu in the 1950s and '60s. Scott was now booking for McMahon and, given his history with Stu, it was natural that he be tapped to hammer out the deal. While Stu Hart's biography *Stu Hart: Lord of the Ring* states the deal was sealed on a handshake, a letter to Stu from Barnett indicates that an agreement was signed on August 24, 1984.

Vince would purchase the territory, including Stu's TV spots, for $1 million, to be paid off $100,000 a year, for ten years. Stu was also promised 10 percent of the gate from all house shows in Edmonton and Calgary. The agreement stipulated that Vince would hire Bret, Dynamite Kid, Davey Boy Smith, and Jim Neidhart.

Bruce would be given work too, as a booking agent, organizing WWF shows and lining up publicity in major cities such as Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, and Seattle. It was a prominent position, but as far as Bruce was concerned, it was table scraps. How dare they treat a man of his vision, the rightful heir to his father's throne, as a mere flunky? "Bruce was so incensed," Keith recalls. "He felt like he had the carpet pulled out from under him."

Ross agrees: "Bruce was unhappy. He wasn't offered a job as a wrestler [or a booker] … and I think he felt he was at the prime of his career. In reality, [at thirty-four] he was a little older than some of the others and maybe he just

didn't have the size and weight the WWF was looking for.... I think Bruce felt kind of shunned."

When Stu arrived at the Pavilion dressing room on August 31, 1984, he faced his son's wrath but stood firm. "It's my promotion," he said. "I'll do what I want with it."[18]

More than twenty years later, Bruce remains bitter about the experience. "I basically got screwed on the whole deal," he says. "I wasn't told a damn thing about it. Between Stu and Keith, I never knew anything was cooking. The consensus was that if they called me I would've been pissed and I would've raised hell about it.... [Stampede Wrestling] at that time was pretty much my recipe ... and it was an awesome recipe. We could have taken it anywhere."

Chapter fifteen

Back in the Saddle

"The worst year of Stu's life was the year he didn't have wrestling to worry about," said Keith Hart to a reporter late in 1985.[1]

The wrestling game was in the Hart papa's blood. It was his obsession, and without it he was lost, stalking around his mansion in a huff, rambling about the glory days of his beloved sport.

Stu wasn't sure he liked the WWF's product, its slick *Maple Leaf Wrestling* program airing every Saturday afternoon on CFAC-TV in the old Stampede Wrestling time slot. But he looked forward to co-promoting the WWF events when they came to Calgary. It made him feel involved once more with the business he lived for.

Stu was as shocked as anybody when the first WWF shows failed to live up to expectations at the box office. In October and November of 1984, and in January 1985, the WWF came to the Calgary Saddledome, a new eighteen-thousand-seat arena on the Stampede grounds that was built as a home for the Calgary Flames and in anticipation of the 1988 Winter Olympics. Business was so disappointing at the Dome that, by February, the WWF had given up on the venue and moved to the seven-thousand-seat Stampede Corral across the street. But a February 27 show at the Corral was the WWF's worst yet, bringing in only about seven hundred fans.[2] It was startling, as the WWF was routinely selling out Madison Square Garden, Maple Leaf Gardens, and the Philadelphia Spectrum.

Wrestler Karl Moffatt as monster heel Jason the Terrible, a hockey-masked, axe-wielding knockoff of the teen slasher from the popular *Friday the 13th* movie series.

What the WWF failed to grasp was the extent to which the new brand was a slap in the face to western Canadian fans. Suddenly, Stu's most popular son, Bret, a main event hero of the region, was showing up at the bottom of the cards, either losing to McMahon's stars or fighting boring matches with bums that weren't of his calibre. A sulky Bruce Hart was relegated to the sidelines, while the devious J.R. Foley was being used as a referee.

It seemed as if the WWF was treating Calgary as a secondary market. While its cards featured a few grapplers of star quality, such as Andre the Giant, they were mostly filled with mediocre talent that failed to excite the audience. A column in the *Calgary Herald* griped, "The WWF wrestlers are bigger and faster and better built [than the stars of Stampede Wrestling] ... but bland to the fans."[3]

When it came to rowdy fun, the WWF's TV show couldn't compare with that of Stampede Wrestling either. *Maple Leaf Wrestling* seldom featured the best matches the WWF had to offer. Instead, it was full of interviews with the wrestlers, who played up their cartoonish personas, and "squash-jobs," where stars would easily roll over a series of nobodies, jobbers who were there to make them look good. The show was little more than a teaser for the live events and a far cry from the wild battles that had been fought each week on *Stampede Wrestling*.

Suddenly, out of left field, a new player came into the game. A group of investors and long-time Stampede fans decided to start up their own wrestling organization, which would run head to head with the WWF in Alberta. The upstart company's name? Stampede Wrestling. Stu had never bothered to trademark the name of his business.

When advertisements began appearing proclaiming "Stampede Wrestling is back!" the Harts denounced the organization and made it clear they were in no way involved. "These guys have a lot of gall," Stu told the *Calgary Sun*. "Using the name Stampede Wrestling is in poor taste and misleading." In the same piece, Bruce stated that his family was dedicated to developing the WWF's interests in Alberta.[4]

One of the investors in the all-new Stampede Wrestling told *Alberta Report* he was heartbroken when Stu pulled the plug on Stampede, and he took swipes at the WWF. "Maple Leaf Wrestling is boring!" he said. "There's no action. It's just a bunch of big goons."[5] The new product was hyped as a return to the glory days and, on the surface, the new promoters seemed to have a good game plan. The new show would be aired every Friday in the familiar old Victoria Pavilion, featuring fan favourites such as Bad News Allen, Leo Burke, Duke Myers, and the Cuban Assassin.

But the reality failed to live up to the dream. Without the Harts' involvement, fans saw the new Stampede Wrestling as an impostor and when the show debuted at the Pavilion in February 1985, the attendance was dismal. Top names dropped out rapidly and by the end of the month the gigs were drawing pathetic crowds of about fifty fans a night. The March shows were cancelled. In the middle of that month, a group of wrestlers, including the Cuban Assassin and "No Class" Bobby Bass, descended on the Calgary Boxing and Wrestling Commission. "All we want is the wages we were promised," Bass roared.[6] More than twenty wrestlers had worked some three weeks for less than one week's pay. Many of them wound up broke and stranded in Calgary, living in the dumpy Regis Hotel, which took them in as a gesture of goodwill.

The unofficial Stampede Wrestling was officially dead.

According to Ross Hart, Bruce had been in talks with the upstart promotion when it first formulated its business plan late in 1984. Bruce was working with the WWF and hated it. He thought it had a sorry set of wrestlers and believed he could run the show better. Bruce wasn't afraid to voice those opinions either. But his voice wasn't being heard. He felt like his creativity was being stifled and hated being treated like a puppet in a territory where he once pulled the strings. Investors in the fledgling wrestling group appealed to Bruce's bruised ego and his belief that he was cheated out of his destiny. They approached him to be a part of their organization, promising him he would be the booker. Once again, Bruce would be pulling the strings.

Bruce wasn't the only one who planned to join the new venture. Dynamite Kid and Davey Boy Smith, who together Vince McMahon had dubbed The British Bulldogs, were less than thrilled with the way they were being used in the WWF and, on Bruce's encouragement, they too gave serious consideration to joining the new group. In one sense, it would make life easier, as they were both married and starting families in Calgary.

The British Bulldogs were rising up the ranks in the WWF. They were certainly not stuck at the bottom of the cards as Bret Hart and Jim Neidhart were. But Ross says the Bulldogs weren't comfortable with what they saw as an "American clique" in the WWF dressing room. They also preferred working in Japan, where their wages were guaranteed, as opposed to working in the WWF, where the paycheque depended on how healthy the gates were and how high one was on the card.[7]

Their relationship with the WWF was also strained when, while working in Japan, they left the New Japan wrestling group for rival All Japan. Financially it made sense. They were offered $20,000 each up front and $6,200 a

week for the tour, which was a grand a week more than they were making with New Japan. But New Japan was working with the WWF, paying McMahon huge booking fees to send his top stars overseas. When the Bulldogs went to All Japan, McMahon was furious.

So was Stu. He too was working with McMahon, co-promoting in the West, and accustomed to doing business with New Japan. When Stampede Wrestling was active, Stu collected booking fees when his wrestlers went on Japanese tours. Ross says his father was in negotiations with New Japan to begin booking talent again when Dynamite and Davey jumped ship. "When this happened, [New Japan] thought my dad was behind it somehow … and they never worked with us again," Ross says.

"What the fuck did you two think you were doing, going to All Japan?" Stu growled when the boys returned to Calgary.

Dynamite answered, "Stu, that's my prerogative."

"Well you just cost me, you little bastard."[8]

Ultimately, the British Bulldogs were too hot a property to risk everything they had on a fledgling promotion in Calgary, and they backed out of talks to be part of the new Stampede Wrestling. This reflected poorly on Bruce, who said he could bring the Bulldogs in. Meanwhile, it was rumoured that Bad News Allen refused to work for the new operation if Bruce was in charge. Bad News was going to be one of the stars of the promotion and the investors didn't want to lose him. Bruce was demoted before the show even began. He was told he wouldn't be the booker.

"Bruce bowed out and it was kept a secret that he had been involved [with the new Stampede Wrestling] in any way," Ross says. "It was a tough pill for him to swallow.… My dad was quite upset with Bruce." However, Ross stresses, his brother never actually worked for the upstart organization, and he always did his job for the WWF, sending out press releases and promoting shows in the West. Even so, Keith says McMahon found out about Bruce's talks with the competition and used the knowledge to his advantage.

After the WWF's dismal showing in Calgary, McMahon wanted out of his agreement with Stu. He told the Hart godfather that he couldn't afford to pay him the promised $100,000 a year and that the Harts were free to renew operations in the territory if they wanted to. Could Stu have held McMahon to the original agreement? Not easily. For one thing, if Stu fought McMahon, he would likely be jeopardizing the careers of his family in the WWF. And, according to Keith, Bruce's talks with the competition were viewed by McMahon as a violation of the non-competition agreement McMahon had made with the Harts. McMahon may have used this as a reason to cancel their agreement.[9]

That damn Bruce. It was becoming increasingly apparent that he would never be happy unless he was running Stampede Wrestling. It was his obsession. And Stu could not deny that a big part of him missed it, too. Within a month, Stampede Wrestling, the genuine Hart article, was back in business.

The return of Ed Whalen cannot be underestimated when exploring Stu's motives for again jumping into the frying pan that was the wrestling business. Whalen, then fifty-eight, had scored his dream job working as an announcer for the Calgary Flames. Here he was, a renowned sportscaster associated with Canada's national pastime. He felt he was at the pinnacle of his career working with a respected organization such as the NHL. Gone were the days when he stewed over the antics of the wrestlers, when he had to constantly stand guard, worrying about what Bruce Hart was going to try to get away with. He no longer had to be the voice of reason and morality, constantly enforcing these things to wild men who had no sense for such matters. His dignity was no longer at stake.

So why did he go back? For that matter, why did he again use his clout with CFAC-TV to get Stu a new spot, airing after *Maple Leaf Wrestling* on Saturday afternoons? Without television, it is unlikely Stu could have revived the promotion, so why didn't Ed just leave well enough alone?

"Ed loved Stu," says Nomi Whalen. "He saw Stu's sweetness and his spirit.... When he walked away, he was walking away from the behaviour, not Stu." Now, Whalen saw his friend needed him and stepped in to help. He did so on one condition – that he have a certain level of creative control over the show. He returned to Stampede Wrestling, which resumed operations in October 1985, not only as an announcer but as executive producer. Whalen promised the public that the violence would be toned down.

One of his first orders of business was to tame Bad News Allen. If Allen was to return to the show, Whalen decreed he would be recast as a babyface. It was a poor fit. In an interview with Whalen, who jokingly introduced him as Good News Allen, Allen apologized to the announcer and to the viewers for his past conduct, saying that he had learned the error of his ways. The speech, delivered by the wrestler in a dapper three-piece suit, was awkwardly delivered. Allen wasn't comfortable playing the humble, repentant role. Rage and indignation came far more naturally to him. "It was bologna," says Allen. "People wanted to see me as a heel."

News could have left the territory – McMahon was trying to recruit him – but he was starting a family and didn't want to be far from home. Had Bad News softened? Not much. When crossed, he was as dangerous as ever, a fact

his former tag team partner Angel Acevedo, the Cuban Assassin, can attest to. Acevedo and Allen had been best friends, with Acevedo the best man at Allen's wedding in 1985. But when their wives had a falling out, it led to a near fight to the death between the two men in a Denny's restaurant parking lot.

The chaos began when Allen's bride, Helen, slapped Acevedo's wife, Pat, for supposedly talking behind her back. Allen says that when he got home late that night, he received a call from Acevedo, who threatened to kill his wife. It's a charge Acevedo denies. The venomous exchange escalated and soon the two men and their wives were headed to the Denny's, close to Acevedo's apartment, to settle the score. Allen backhanded Acevedo across his shaggy face, cutting his lip. Acevedo pulled a hunting knife and came after Allen. Allen grabbed a baseball bat from the trunk of his car and began swinging. Somehow, in the struggle, Allen's wife was slashed. Pat fled in a panic and called the police. When the cops arrived on the scene, Acevedo was in his car, attempting to flee as Allen smashed the windshield with the bat. Neither man was charged.*

Allen remains resentful about the dispute, but not Acevedo. "I don't have enemies," says the bearded villain who today at age sixty-four works for Keith Hart's son as part of a house painting crew. "I only have friends all around the world."

The fiery nature of the wrestlers aside, Stu and Ed faced another hurdle when they put Stampede Wrestling back on the air. In a galling turn of events, the upstart group that tried to promote wrestling in the territory earlier that year using the name Stampede Wrestling filed a $1 million lawsuit against Stu, Whalen, and CFAC-TV in late 1985. It alleged that the defendants were benefiting from using another company's name. The claim was thrown out of court.

Now there was nothing to stop the show from rolling. But how far could it roll without Bret, Davey Boy, and Dynamite, three of its greatest stars?

Bad News Allen was not the only Stampede Wrestling star to return to the fold when the promotion relaunched in October 1985. Kerry Brown, Duke Myers, J.R. Foley, Leo Burke, The Great Gama, and "Rotten" Ron Starr all reappeared. With Bad News working as a good guy, Honky Tonk Wayne was

*The battle continued in the late 1980s in the WWF, when the two men ran into each other in a Tennessee dressing room. Allen was being pushed as a top star at the time, and Acevedo was trying out for a spot on the roster. When they saw each other, Acevedo pulled his knife and Allen grabbed a chair as wrestlers struggled to separate the former pals.

pushed as the top villain in the territory. While not a great wrestler, he was an exceptionally funny entertainer who played his southern slimeball shtick to the hilt. When the Harts challenged Honky Tonk and Ron Starr to be part of a six-man elimination tag team bout, his reply to Whalen was priceless. "They wanna six-man elimination? That's fine with the Memphis Mafia," he crowed with a cocky grin. "We like six. We had six eggs over easy for breakfast this morning. I got six old ladies. I got six Cadillacs and I got six diamond rings, Ed Whalen!"

But Honky Tonk was not happy in the territory. Keith Hart remembers him constantly complaining on the road and making calls to his friend Hulk Hogan in the WWF in the hopes that he would eventually be booked for the big time. By 1987, his wish would come true.

Occasionally, when they had time off from other commitments, Bret, Neidhart, Davey Boy, and Dynamite returned to wrestle on a few cards. On these instances, business boomed, as all four men had become massive stars in the WWF. When they came back to Calgary, they were treated as royalty.

Playing hard to get with McMahon had worked in the British Bulldogs' favour, and he cajoled them back to the promotion for WrestleMania II on April 7, 1986, where they became the WWF World Tag Team champions at Chicago's Rosemont Horizon. With their combined speed and agility, along with Dynamite's hard, reckless style and Davey Boy's superhuman strength, they were the greatest tag team in the world.

Bret managed to turn around his fortunes too, after a shaky start. Initially, the WWF created a rhinestone cowboy gimmick for Bret. He was supposed to enter the ring on a horse, wearing a cowboy hat, chaps, and a glittering sequined jacket. Bret hated the idea and resisted it every step of the way. He didn't even like country music, he argued, and he thought it would be an insult to the real cowboys in his hometown.[10] As an alternative, Bret suggested he form a heel tag team called the Hart Foundation with his bulky brother-in-law, Jim Neidhart. They could even use Jimmy Hart (no relation to the Hart family) as their manager. The "Mouth of the South" was one of the best heel managers in the business, a charismatic weasel who dressed flamboyantly and screamed taunts at the audience through a megaphone.

Rechristened Bret "The Hitman" Hart and Jim "The Anvil" Neidhart and dressed in gaudy pink-and-black tights, the Hart Foundation became hugely popular in the WWF. Their heroic personas in Stampede Wrestling were ditched as they revamped themselves as a pair of villainous sleazeballs. Neidhart played the maniac role, wearing sunglasses to the ring and tugging at his orange, pointy beard as he cackled away during his interviews.

Bret greased his long brown hair, giving it a permanent wet look, and wore wraparound shades, playing it cool and cocky. He based his evil persona, he says, on Dynamite Kid's during his days as a Stampede heel. In a *Calgary Sun* column he wrote, Bret aptly summed up the team's dynamic created by Neidhart's incredible brute strength and Bret's impeccable wrestling skills: "We were like a Porsche and a tank."[11]

But bringing back the old faces wasn't going to be enough to revive Stampede Wrestling. Competing with the flash and sizzle of the WWF required upgraded production values, far-out angles, and a new school of stars. And Stu didn't have a Vince McMahon budget. The revamp would have to be done at a grassroots level.

The old, bloodstained mat on the wrestling ring was replaced by a red, white, and blue canvas brandishing the Calgary Stampede logo. Jim Davies, the pint-sized, fedora-wearing *Calgary Sun* columnist, was brought into the picture as Whalen's cheeky sidekick. Yet what the promotion really needed was a fresh infusion of wrestling talent.

Fortunately, the Harts had one more star to unleash on the world. In a family of outstanding athletes, Owen Hart, youngest of the twelve siblings, was the best of the bunch. Stories abound in the wrestling world of grapplers passing through Stu's territory in the early 1970s and being amazed by the little blond boy doing flying backflips and executing difficult wrestling moves to perfection in Stu's backyard ring.

Owen was always a natural performer. He was a gifted mimic and loved making prank phone calls to his dad, pretending to be various wrestlers and weirdos, confounding Stu with absurd scenarios. When Stu realized it was Owen he would chuckle and say, "That little bastard got me again." Owen wasn't a genuine troublemaker, however. Growing up, he both feared and respected Stu, and he wanted nothing more than to make his dad proud. In high school, he played football and wrestled, winning city and provincial championships. He continued the sport while pursuing a degree in physical education at the University of Calgary. "I was living my dad's dream, being an amateur wrestler and going for the Olympics," Owen said. "But I hated it.... I always had this feeling: 'When I come home I want to please my dad....' I should have said, 'I don't want this.'"[12]

Owen was exposed to the craziness of the wrestling business at a young age. When he was fourteen, he accompanied Bruce and Keith to a gig in Honolulu, where they were attacked by rowdy fans. The youngest Hart jumped to their defence, coming out of the rumble with a black eye. He was only sixteen

when he began wrestling in small towns along the Stampede circuit, wearing a mask to maintain his eligibility as an amateur, as professional wrestlers were not allowed to wrestle in the amateur ranks.[13]

Owen was handsome and likable. Having grown up studying the greats who passed through the promotion, he learned to brawl with the brawlers, fly with the fliers, and mix it up with just about anyone in a technical wrestling match. From a young age, he also understood a thing or two about ring psychology. He knew how to tell a story with his body, how to pace a match, how to read the fans and keep them on the edge of their seats. Bruce, who had formed a close bond with his youngest brother, was "salivating at his potential in the family business," writes Owen's widow, Martha, in her book, *Broken Harts*.[14]

But Owen didn't want a career as a professional wrestler. He wanted to be a teacher. His girlfriend Martha Patterson, a pretty but prudish blond from a struggling single-parent home, who he had been dating since high school, wanted that as well. She was repulsed by the wrestling world and made no bones about it. She recalls an incident where out of the blue Bret asked, "You want to wrestle, right Owen?"

"I jumped right in," writes Martha. "'Oh no, he's going to be a teacher....' Wrestling was out of the question."[15]

But by the spring of 1986, Stampede Wrestling needed a hero and, like most university students, Owen needed money. Bruce persuaded his little brother to give it a try, and Owen made his pro debut in May of that year. He was a sensation, incorporating Bret's impeccable technical skills with the high-flying stunts he picked up watching Dynamite Kid and Japan's Tiger Mask, whom he revered. Long-time Stampede fans had a special affection for the blue-eyed baby of the beloved Hart clan, and Owen played up to it perfectly.

Retired wrestler Mike Shaw, who worked in the business for twenty years, including a stint in the WWF, says that, in all his years, he never saw a wrestler who was as genuinely loved by the fans as Owen was in Stampede Wrestling. "We did an angle once where Owen had to wear an eye patch, and I stuck a fork inside the patch," Shaw says. "People were taken out of the Pavilion in tears. Girls and guys were in the front row crying. People loved him. He was the Hart baby, the hometown kid."

Although he had little desire to be in the business long term, Owen enjoyed wrestling. He liked showing off his skills and entertaining fans and was happy to help his father. Most importantly, he was making $500 a week, a salary that eventually doubled. He was already set on building a nest egg

for his future with Martha, and where else could a twenty-one-year-old kid make that kind of money?

In his earliest matches, Owen teamed up with his brother-in-law Ben Bassarab, and the two feuded with the masked Viet Cong Express, a duo that included future Japanese legend Hiroshi Hase. The non-stop action of those mercurial bouts gained notoriety around the world, and it wasn't long before the Japanese were clamouring for Owen.

A few of the wrestlers were at first turned off by the rising Hart star. They thought him conceited, demanding a star push in his rookie year simply because of his family. But any arrogance Owen displayed early in his career was eventually outgrown. He was generally regarded as friendly and down-to-earth. The youngest Hart was in many ways the most mature. He was clean living and never swore. He saved his money and never lost sight of his dream to marry Martha and start a family. For Owen, wrestling was a means to an end.

Owen wasn't the only fresh face in the territory. In the mid-1980s, the Hart boys began actively recruiting and training a new crop of wrestlers down in the Dungeon, just as Stu had in previous decades. Under Bruce, Keith, and Ross, the harsh training regiment became known as The School of Hart Knocks, and it churned out some of the greatest stars in the business.

By the mid-'80s, the world was more aware of Stampede Wrestling than ever. The show scored a coup when it was broadcast across Canada on TSN (The Sports Network). Meanwhile, with tag teams the British Bulldogs and the Hart Foundation standing out among the WWF's most spectacular stars, word got around that they were products of Stampede Wrestling and fans began paying attention. American wrestling magazines, which usually ignored Canadian territories, began reporting on Stampede regularly.

Certainly the most successful of the newcomers in this era was Chris Benoit, who is one of the biggest stars in WWE (formerly the WWF) today, having held the World Heavyweight title in 2004. Benoit was a withdrawn twelve year old when his family moved to Edmonton from Montreal in the late '70s. Benoit's life was changed when he saw Dynamite Kid wrestle at Edmonton's Sales Pavilion in 1979. "I looked up to him so much," Benoit says. "He was my Superman. His style was so aggressive, so believable, so technically sound." Dynamite made Benoit want to be a wrestler, and the boy told his idol as much the first time they met. Bret Hart remembers a teenage Benoit staring down at his feet, blushing as he spoke to Dynamite, telling him he hoped to one day follow in his footsteps.[16]

When Benoit graduated from high school in 1985, he joined The School of Hart Knocks. Weekdays he worked at his father's air infiltration business, but come the weekend, the skinny young man was on a Greyhound headed to Calgary for the brutal stretching and bump-taking in the Dungeon. Benoit was primarily trained by the brothers, but a few times seventy-year-old Stu came down to join in the fun. The old man's vice-like holds made Benoit scream. But he was never deterred. Benoit was serious-minded, firm in his goals, and if this was the road he had to take, he was ready.

By the end of the year, the kid was making his pro wrestling debut. Even when he was green, wrestlers and fans alike noticed similarities between Benoit's style and that of Dynamite Kid. But Benoit had a more rational head on his shoulders. He was not hindered by a hair-trigger temper, and he showed little interest in excessive partying. Mike Shaw calls him "Dynamite without the dark side." Bret would later write that he saw "the ghost of the Dynamite Kid" in the ring when he watched Benoit wrestle.[17] Dynamite saw it, too. Years later, he staggered to the ring after one of Benoit's matches and drunkenly hung his wrestling boots around the young man's neck. It was the greatest honour he could bestow.

Another star of the era was Brian Pillman. A rash, high-strung athlete raised in a Cincinnati suburb, Pillman at first pursued a career in football with the Cincinnati Bengals and then the Calgary Stampeders. When Pillman broke his ankle with the Stamps, he made a call to Keith Hart. He was invited to the Dungeon.

Standing only five-foot-nine but bulked up on steroids, Pillman was strong and agile. A womanizing jock with a curly golden-brown mullet, pretty face, and a wildman persona, the Harts knew he'd be an instant hit with female fans. After a few months of training, they rushed him to the ring where, as predicted, he became a crowd favourite. "Flyin'" Brian was an airborne warrior with a dramatic flair that worked crowds into a froth. Soon, Pillman was teamed up with his mentor Bruce Hart, as Badd Company, a leather jacket- and headband-wearing duo who relished their roles as a pair of beautiful bad boys.

Stampede Wrestling was also set upon by some of the finest Japanese wrestlers in the world at that time, including the Viet Cong Express and Jushin Liger. The bouts the Japanese wrestlers had with the likes of Owen Hart, Pillman, and Benoit changed the face of wrestling, taking aerial exhibitions to new heights.

Meanwhile, a corny but effective gimmick was cooked up when rookie wrestler Karl Moffat was put in a goalie mask and a pair of coveralls and

Flyin' Brian Pillman sails across the ring, bowling over "Champagne" Gerry Morrow with a flying clothesline.

named Jason the Terrible, after the teen-slashing monster in the popular *Friday the 13th* movie series. It was not a particularly inspired concept. What made it work – for a time, Jason was the territory's hottest heel – was the zaniness with which it was carried off. Accompanying the mute, axe-wielding beast to the ring was The Zodiak, an evil masked character who controlled Jason with the powers of the occult.

Cheesier still were the Zodiak-Jason promos, pretaped for the TV show. Zodiak's voice, warped through a distortion box, sounded vaguely demonic. He and Jason stood in front of a giant screen projecting the image of moving stars: viewers were to think that the interview was being broadcast from another dimension. Unfortunately, it came off as two goons trying, and failing, to be scary using cut-rate production not fit for the worst B-movie. The scenes were so bad, however, that they took on an endearing, kitschy quality.

Bruce Hart's taste for absurdities also came into play as The Zodiak prayed to a malicious deity he called The Almighty Luke and Jason writhed and twisted like a tormented beast, frequently lunging at the camera man in a state of bloodlust.*

The Harts also responded to the Hulk Hogan craze of this era when recruiting new wrestlers. Hulk Hogan was a steroid-pumped bodybuilder with limited wrestling skills and the Harts were convinced they too needed a few impossibly muscular mutants in their stable. Answering the call was Boston's Steve "The Strangler" DiSalvo, New Hampshire's Ted Arcidi, and Wisconsin's Bill Kazmaier. Unfortunately, none of these men came close to matching Hogan's awesome charisma.

Of the muscle brigade, only DiSalvo made any real impact on the territory, coming off as a loathsome villain. Kazmaier and Arcidi were two of the strongest men in the world but neither of them had any business in a ring. As Mike Shaw recalls, "Kazmaier and Arcidi wrestled each other and it was like watching two guys knee deep in wet cement."

The Karachi Vice was the last evil army the noble Harts would face in their hometown ring. From its earliest days, wrestling had exploited societal fears and racial stereotypes. The Karachi Vice – its name inspired by TV's *Miami Vice* – played on the attitudes of some audience members toward immigrants. That attitude had been clear for years as chants of "Go home, Paki!" and "Paki shit!" rattled the rafters in every arena Gama Singh appeared in.

*As dorky as this gimmick was, the WWF recreated it in the 1990s with Kane, a mute beast who was also controlled by the occult powers of an evil handler.

Gama, who was East Indian, played a despicable character to be sure. His most vile tactic was throwing fireballs into the face of his enemies, an ancient trick from the homeland, or so the crowd was told. (In truth, he was using flash paper, as a magician uses, which flashes vividly and burns out instantly. It was relatively safe, though there were a few cases of singed eyebrows.) Gama got his biggest reaction when he fireballed Owen. As the Harts' baby boy lay sprawled on the canvas, writhing in pain, his supposedly charred face buried in his hands, the fans screamed for Gama's blood. "People called Stu's house saying they were going to throw acid on me at the next match," Gama remembers. "Stu really had to beef up security."

Gama says he never took issue with the racist chants rising from the audience. In fact, he fanned the flames. "All that heat meant I was doing my job," he says. "This was my bread and butter." So Gama was disappointed with Ed Whalen when the show began airing on TSN. As the crowd erupted into a hearty round of racist chants, Whalen got on the microphone and ordered them to stop. "Listen," he lectured. "This show is going nationwide and this is not the image we want to portray of Calgary."

"Without realizing it," Gama says, "Ed was killing my heat."

While Bruce takes credit for developing the Karachi Vice angle in 1986, Gama says it was his idea to partner up with Mike Shaw, a sweaty tub of blubber from Michigan with hair on his back to match the beard on his face. Shaw, who weighed in at 360 pounds, was a mid-card performer until the decision was made to put a turban on his head and rename him Makhan Singh. "We cooked up this contrived notion about Makhan being a born-again Pakistani, whatever the hell that meant," says Bruce with a laugh. "But it worked."

Overnight, the Karachi Vice became a cult sensation. Shaw remembers walking with his wife in downtown Calgary when a can of Coca-Cola whizzed by their heads. He turned around to see a carload of teens giving him the finger and shouting, "Karachi Vice sucks!" "I think taking a white guy and giving him an Indian name just drove people crazy," says Shaw.

If Shaw's gimmick riled up the audience, his sharp tongue worked them into a frenzy. In interviews with Whalen, he frequently belittled Calgary, rubbing it in when the Calgary Flames lost a game, mocking the Calgary Tower as a symbol of phallic inadequacy. Shaw claims that just before the 1988 Winter Olympics he received a letter from then mayor Ralph Klein. "It said they were trying to promote Calgary as being a kind, loving western city and they wanted me to hold off on my negative comments before the Olympics," Shaw says. "Of course, I got worse after that.... If anybody's going to believe what's

said in a wrestling match and not come to Calgary, they couldn't be of sound mind anyway."

At the gimmick's height, around 1988, there was even a Karachi Vice fan club. While the Harts sold Karachi Vice T-shirts, fans often showed up wearing T-shirts of their own, bearing insulting slogans such as "Karachi Mice" and "Karachi Lice." A popular poster for sale at the matches featured Mike Shaw wearing a toilet seat on his head. This was appropriate, as the babyfaces had taken to calling him "The Toilet Bowl."*

While Shaw and Gama were the nucleus of Karachi Vice, at various times the group also included such creeps as Steve DiSalvo, Ron Starr, Kerry Brown, and frizzy-haired female wrestler Rhonda Singh. There was a plan to put the 260-pound woman in a bikini and have her come to the ring as The Karachi Queen, but it never materialized.

Karachi Vice made every effort to portray itself as a grotesque group of deviants, bragging to Whalen about their dressing room orgies with women who supposedly found them irresistible. On these decadent occasions, the Vice dined, they said, on zesty barbequed eel and Karachi Kooler, which, according to the wrestling programs, consisted of scotch and cream soda.

The Vice found themselves a manager in the form of Abu Wizal. Outside the ring, Wizal was Milad Elzein from Beirut, a hardcore wrestling fan who moved to Calgary in 1970 at the age of ten. Standing just over five feet tall and weighing about 130 pounds, Elzein never imagined he would be a character in the Harts' roving circus until Bruce stuck him in Arab robes and dark sunglasses, dispatching him into the ring to cheat on behalf of the bad guys. The original plan was to call him Abu Nidal, after the Palestinian terrorist, but Whalen protested that it was tasteless. Instead, Elzein was introduced as Abu Wizal, financial adviser to the Karachi Vice. That twist tickles him to this day: "Between us all we probably didn't have a hundred bucks to rub together."

*A good portion of Shaw's career was built on gross-out gimmicks, as during his WWF stint in the 1990s when he was cast as the world's most repulsive slob, Bastion Booger. He also had a successful run in Ted Turner's WCW as a lovable mental patient named Norman the Lunatic.

Chapter sixteen

The Death of Stampede Wrestling

Behind-the-scenes anarchy had been a part of the Stampede Wrestling world from day one, but by the late 1980s the territory was in chaos. There was bedlam on the tracks at every turn and by the decade's end this would play a major factor in permanently derailing the wrestling promotion Stu had spent his life creating.

The old problems between father and son cropped up almost immediately when Stampede Wrestling relaunched, with Stu the traditionalist butting heads with Bruce and his batty concepts. A December 1985 article in the *Calgary Herald* captured the struggle perfectly: "The problem is … Stu wants his sons to take over, but isn't willing to allow them the freedom to do so.… He's afraid to let go." Stu's rebuttal seemed to be aimed directly at Bruce: "You're always hoping that maybe your kids will take over the responsibility.… I'm hoping some of my boys will cut down on their wrestling and take care of the administration.… I don't want to see this business go down the drain."[1]

One of the symptoms of the territory's ills was the endless pranks that had become so destructive and mean-spirited they were driving wrestlers away. Of course, this was the region that had given birth to the legendary Mabel parties. Wild ribs were nothing new. But fuelled by a smorgasbord of drugs, the gags took on a new edge that could slice a man in half.

It wasn't all cruel. Owen, Bruce, and Ross frequently targeted Brian Pillman, who they treated like a brother. On a tour stop in Kelowna, British

Bruce Hart (left) and Brian Pillman made up one of the dominant Stampede Wrestling tag teams of the late 1980s. With their shades, headbands, and leather jackets, they presented themselves as a bad boy duo Badd Company.

Columbia, Bruce and Owen took in a wet, mangy dog they found roaming the hotel parking lot. As Pillman was out for the evening with one of the many paramours he seemed to have in every town, the Hart brothers took the dog to Flyin' Brian's room. They fed the mutt pizza, then dressed it in Pillman's jacket and sunglasses and tucked it away in the wrestler's bed. They also removed the light bulbs from the room. A few hours later, when Pillman arrived from his fling, fumbling for the lights, the sharp-dressed dog leapt off the bed in attack mode and chased him from the room.[2]

Even Bad News Allen, never known for his sense of humour, got in on the ribs. When Jason the Terrible, otherwise known as Karl Moffat, was a rookie, the boys convinced him that the best way to get on the good side of the surly Allen was to ask him about his son, who they claimed was a concert pianist. Moffat approached the ever intense Bad News sitting at the front of the tour bus with trepidation and asked, in his high-pitched voice, "Mr. Allen, may I talk to you?"

"Go ahead, Karl," Bad News said.

"I just want to congratulate you on your son and what a terrific pianist he is."

Allen stared at Moffat as the rookie continued to stammer words of praise. Suddenly he slammed Moffat into a seat and put a knife to his throat. "Are you making a joke about my kid?" Allen screamed. "My kid lost his fingers in a lawn mower accident. I should kill you!" Moffat burst into tears, realizing he had been humiliated in front of his fellow wrestlers.

Nobody suffered as much as the massive Bill Kazmaier. Most of the boys disliked "the world's strongest man" immensely. With his sixty-inch chest and twenty-three inch biceps, there was no question Kazmaier, who set a world record when he bench-pressed 661 pounds, was monstrous. But in the ring, he could barely execute the most basic moves. Nor could he grasp the business. Once, when Kazmaier thought he had won the North American title belt only to have it stripped from him in the course of some wacky angle, he phoned Stu in a rage. Stu had to explain to him how the game worked. Still, Kazmaier was arrogant and often told the boys it was only a matter of time before he was a big star in the WWF. Then, he said, he would leave this small-time territory and its small-time talents behind.

Kazmaier was also vehemently opposed to recreational drug use, which put him at odds with many of the boys on the roster. Seeing this as his weakness, the grapplers played with his head relentlessly. One afternoon on the road, Ben Bassarab and Brian Pillman had a bag of talcum powder they pretended was cocaine. Sitting in the van in front of Kazmaier, they plunged

their faces into the bag, snorting voraciously, acting as if they were flying high. When they offered a snort to young John Hindley, a newcomer to the territory who was wrestling as Davey Boy's cousin, Johnny Smith, Kazmaier became enraged.

"Don't do it, Johnny!" he shouted. "It's the devil!"

Hindley, meanwhile, in on the rib, played his role as the innocent lamb being led to slaughter to perfection. "I wonder what it's like," he said.

The wrestlers took another dip, the tips of their noses white. "Woo! Try it baby!"

Kazmaier roared, his eyeballs bugging out of his head as if they too were muscles ready to explode. "Don't do it! You'll get hooked!"

In another instance, the crew in the van planned a sting on the powerhouse. Gerry Morrow was driving when Bassarab made a racist joke. "Hey! Don't you talk about black people like that!" yelled the man from Martinique.

"Sorry, Gerry," Bassarab replied. "You're my buddy. I didn't mean to talk that way about niggers."

Morrow pulled the van over and the two men staged a fight in the ditch, as only two pro wrestlers could. As planned, Winnipeg wrestler Ron Ritchie jumped into the fray and he and Bassarab started beating Morrow. Bassarab broke a beer bottle and slashed Champagne Gerry across the forehead, as in a wrestling match. Kazmaier watched, trembling. When the faux fight was broken up, Owen, who had been pretending to be asleep, "woke up," took a look at the mess, and demanded to know what had happened. Pillman blamed the scene on the innocent Kazmaier, who played into Pillman's hands when he proceeded to charge at him like an angry bull. Pillman had gotten the rise out of Kazmaier he was looking for and, to the wrestlers' amusement, he was soon running for his life down the highway, chased by a raging mountain of muscle.

Alison Hart never defied her father. The very thought of doing so pained her. But this time she knew he was wrong.

It had been apparent for a long time that she had to get away from her husband, Ben Bassarab. Although Stu had witnessed one of the couple's meltdowns, he refused to support any talks of their divorce. Marriage is a serious commitment, he said, one you honoured for life. When a couple had problems, no matter how severe, they worked it out, they carried on. Especially when children were involved. Alison took her father's words to heart for years. Besides, she had loved Ben.

He arrived on the scene in the early 1980s, a regular at BJ's Gym, where him and Davey Boy Smith became best friends. When he started dating Alison, Bassarab promised her he wouldn't pursue wrestling – she had always hated the sport – but, as Bassarab was a muscular jock, it was only natural that the family invited him to give the game a try. He did, and loved it. By the time he married Alison in May 1983, Ben's career path seemed set.

Alison was determined to make the marriage work, even after the night of Davey Boy's stag, back in 1984, when Ben had been so cruel. Alison was pregnant then with her and Ben's first child and had just been released from the hospital after having an ovarian cyst removed. She wanted Ben to take her straight home. Instead, he left her at Hart House while he headed to the coach house out back. The Neidharts lived there at the time, and Jim was throwing Davey his party.

Keith Hart, who was taking part in the merriment, recalls walking back to the mansion to grab party snacks, only to find his sister crying. "I just got out of the hospital and I want to go home," she sobbed. "Can you tell Ben to give me the car keys so I can go home?" Keith marched back to the coach house to get the keys and smarten up Alison's husband. Bassarab, anything but repentant, made a few foul comments about his pregnant wife that nearly sparked a fight on the spot.

The inevitable battle occurred later in the evening, down the road from Hart House. As Ben, enraged that his wife had pulled him from the party, climbed into the car to drive home, Keith jumped in the passenger's side and started throwing punches. He jammed Bassarab's head under the steering wheel and hammered him in the face as Bassarab tried to gouge out his eyes. Suddenly, Stu was on the scene, dragging Keith by his feet from the car.

Stu followed Alison and Ben home that night and tried to talk sense into the father-to-be as Bassarab, his face bruised and swollen, raged. Alison says she didn't want her dad to leave. Stu told her it was her responsibility to work out her problems with her husband and walked out.

Ben denies being cruel to Alison, but he doesn't refute that he was a wild one. He laughs when he thinks of the so-called villains in the Karachi Vice, Gama Singh and Mike Shaw, being family men, going straight to bed every night after the gigs, while he and his fellow babyfaces raised hell. "In the real world, the babyfaces were the bad guys," he says. "The bad guys were the nice ones, and the good guys, we were just devils."

Bassarab was constantly out drinking and getting into bar fights in his wrestling days. This nearly proved his undoing in late 1985 when he was stabbed through the liver by a man he had been chasing outside a Calgary

nightclub. He returned to the ring a few months later, but his rapidly deteriorating relationship with Alison eventually cost him his job. "I ended up leaving my wife because … it was a joke," Bassarab says over Baileys and coffee during a Saturday afternoon interview at his southwest Calgary home. "I'm supposed to be a father and a husband and I'm out wrestling every night on the road, with a girlfriend in basically every town. I thought, 'This is not fair to Alison. I'm not a husband or a father. Why pretend to be one once a week?' So I left her. Stu was not very happy.… He ended up firing me."

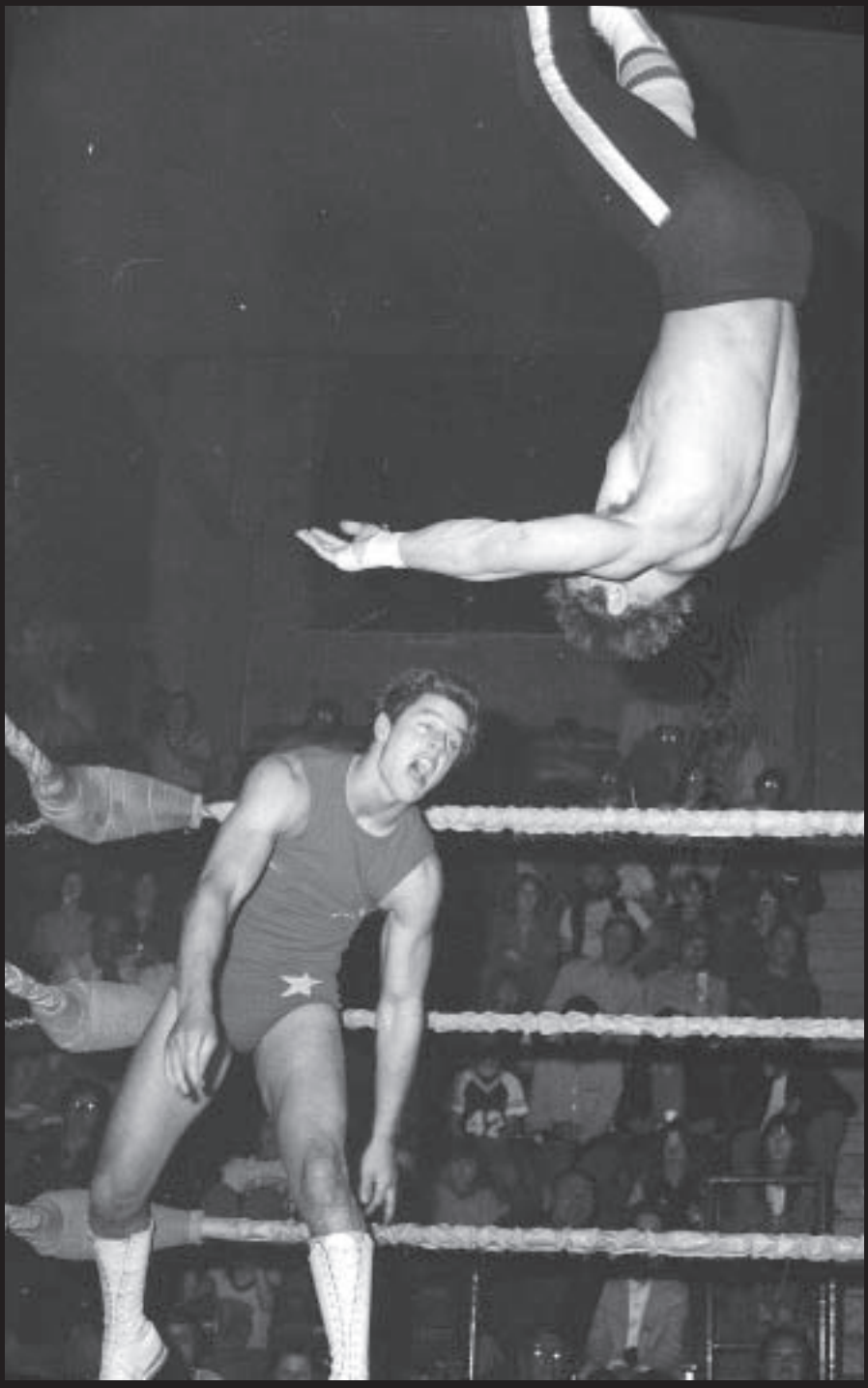
Bassarab says he protested, telling Stu he was living a lie, admitting his infidelities to the old man. Even then, he says, Stu was adamant that Ben and Alison get back together. "Do you think you're the first guy who ever had a relationship on the road?" Ben recalls Stu saying. "You have a family at home." Ben wouldn't budge. He says the WWF expressed interest in him around that time but Stu exerted his influence and convinced the federation not to hire his estranged son-in-law. "He put the block on me," Bassarab says bitterly. "He dangled the carrot and said, 'If you get back with Alison …'"

For a long while, Alison says, she wanted her husband back and did everything to make it work, even though she knew Ben was seeing another woman. Finally, one day, Alison looked at her two daughters – one a toddler, the other a newborn – and realized she didn't want them to be raised by Ben, despite what her father said. That day, a trembling Alison Hart defied Stu and called her lawyer.

The British Bulldogs were wild when they left Stampede Wrestling for the WWF in 1984. But compared with the crazy dogs who returned to the promotion in the latter half of 1988, they seemed like a pair of rambunctious puppies in their younger days.

The team terrorized WWF dressing rooms relentlessly, slipping Ex-Lax, sleeping pills, and hallucinogenics into wrestlers' drinks, cutting up their clothes, shaving people's heads when they passed out, beating the hell out of them if they protested. Dynamite, in particular, seemed to be on an endless booze-fuelled 'roid rage. That he was in constant physical pain made matters only worse.

Unlike his cousin, Davey Boy, who was naturally bigger than him, Dynamite's modest frame was never meant to accommodate the 228 pounds of muscle he had amassed over the years. That body armour, combined with his reckless, high-impact wrestling style, was destroying his body. Years of snap-suplexes, flying headbutts from the top of steel cages, and crash-landing wipeouts on cement floors were breaking him down, though Dynamite



A young, lean Davey Boy Smith sends his cousin Dynamite Kid flying upside down off the top turnbuckle, early 1980s.

never admitted it. He simply popped painkillers, injected cortisone into his joints, and carried on.

On December 16, 1986, he couldn't ignore the pain any longer. He and Davey Boy were taking on Don Muraco and Bob Orton at Copps Coliseum in Hamilton, Ontario. In mid-match, Dynamite crumpled to the mat, sharp pains searing through his spine. The heels, not realizing he was hurt, kicked him and bashed him with a chair as he lay wracked with spasms. Dynamite tried to stop them but his words came out an agonized whisper, drowned by the audience's chants of "Phon-ey!" They couldn't understand why their hero had collapsed when he hadn't even been hit.[3]

On his return to Calgary, Dynamite was told that he had two ruptured discs in his back and extensive nerve damage. After undergoing emergency surgery, he was advised that his body could no longer withstand the punishment he was putting it through. "In my mind, it was like hammering a car till the shock absorbers go," he wrote. Nevertheless, he wasn't about to heed the advice of any doctor who dared recommend he retire at the age of twenty-eight. "Bollocks to that," Dynamite muttered under his breath.[4] As soon as he was able to move, he left the hospital against his doctor's orders. His wife, Michelle, remembers him crawling up the stairs into the house that day.

That's when the calls started coming in from Vince McMahon. The Bulldogs were still the tag team champions and, given Dynamite's condition, they would have to drop the belts as soon as possible. Dynamite told his boss that he needed more time, that he could barely get up off the couch, but McMahon continued to apply pressure. He wanted the Bulldogs to lose the titles to the Iron Sheik and Nikolai Volkoff. Dynamite refused, saying the only team he was willing to drop the belts to was the Hart Foundation. "They earn it every night," he said.

Dynamite returned to work on January 26, 1987, at the Sun Dome in Tampa, Florida. On the way to the ring, he was arm in arm with Davey Boy. It made him feel like a weakling, but it was the only way he could walk. As planned, Bret and Neidhart attacked the Bulldogs from behind. Dynamite was taken out quickly when Jimmy Hart smashed him in the head with his megaphone, supposedly knocking him out cold. Then Davey Boy was double-teamed and pinned. The Hart Foundation was the new World Tag Team champions. To this day, Bret praises Dynamite Kid for giving him the single biggest break of his career.[5]

Before long, the Bulldogs were back in action full time, but Dynamite's abilities were rapidly deteriorating. Every other week he was contending with a new injury. His knees were giving out. He had torn all the ligaments in his

shoulders. Dynamite paid it no heed, pushing his body to the limit nightly. He never took shortcuts, always executing the moves the fans loved despite the blinding pain that cut him to the core. Stu used to rightly say that "Dynamite took more bumps in one match than half these goddamn guys took in their whole career." But Dynamite's style came with great sacrifice. "His passion took over from common sense," wrote Bret in the *Calgary Sun*. "He was the consummate wrestling artist and much like Beethoven, who wrote his most brilliant masterpieces while he was going deaf, the Dynamite Kid had some of his most incredible matches while his back was disintegrating."[6]

The more his body gave out on him, the more Dynamite became consumed with self-loathing. He felt he was letting down the team. Davey Boy was gradually becoming the star of the duo. While Dynamite was losing size and strength, Davey was hitting his peak. He was bigger and stronger than ever. Davey maintained his heartthrob good looks while Dynamite was becoming increasingly grizzled. It was Davey Boy who was scoring the pins; Davey Boy who brought the team's silly mascot, Matilda the bulldog, to the ring, which made the kids love him; Davey Boy who smiled and waved to the crowd while Dynamite winced and scowled, trying to block the pain.

To Dynamite, whose two-fisted pride was everything, this was more than he could bear. He began to lash out. While he respected Davey as the greatest partner he could have, he seemed incapable of showing his appreciation. Instead, he called his cousin a simpleton and treated him like his personal windup toy. It was implicit from the start that Dynamite was the leader. He would decide where they wrestled, who they wrestled, and how they wrestled. Even when it came to the ribs, Dynamite was the instigator and Davey the sidekick. Once he started to slip, however, Dynamite began to feel like a liability, and watching Davey thrive without him stung.

He also suspected Davey's wife, Diana, of fuelling the rivalry behind the scenes. It was the same garbage that she had been feeding Davey for years – that he was the star and Dynamite was jealous and overrated. The only difference now was that a deep, dark part of him felt she was right.

The Harts insist Davey was a good friend to Dynamite through his physical traumas, even Christmas shopping for him when he was bedridden at the end of 1986. Dynamite remembers it differently. He recalls his cousin becoming increasingly distant and ungrateful. Once, Dynamite lashed out: "I brought you to Canada, took you to Japan, got you in the WWF; you are nothing but a selfish bastard!"[7]

At work and play, though, the two put on a united front. One of their favourite ribs involved Jake "The Snake" Roberts's twelve-foot python,

Top: Hinting at the steroid-pumped strongman he would become in the WWF, Davey Boy Smith hoists the Cuban Assassin straight over his head, in 1984.

Bottom: Davey Boy Smith drop kicks Hubert Gallant, 1982.

Damien, which Roberts draped over his felled opponents after a match. In between shows, Roberts kept the snake backstage in a securely tied sack. While the snake was bound, the Bulldogs thought it funny to elbow drop the bag, stick their steroid needles in it, and pour hot coffee over it. When Roberts took the snake out of the bag during his match, the tortured creature was ferocious. On a couple of occasions, it wrapped itself around Roberts's neck and began choking him. Roberts would run to the dressing room and, out of the cameras' sight, fling the serpent across the room.

"They did a lot of mean-spirited things that I couldn't be associated with," says Bret, who neither joined in the revelry nor turned on his destructive brother-in-laws in the dressing room. "You learn in the business to mind your own space. If you get involved and try to be a sheriff in town, you're not going to last."

The Bulldogs' reign of terror in the WWF culminated with Jacques and Raymond Rougeau attacking Dynamite Kid during a TV taping in Fort Wayne, Indiana, punching out his teeth with a pair of brass knuckles. McMahon tried to patch things up, but the Bulldogs were soured on the organization and quit soon after. Those close to Dynamite say that while he recovered from the beating physically, he never got over it mentally. As ever, fierce pride was his worst enemy, and he couldn't stand having people think he lost a fight. It was a constant thorn in his side that he never managed to extricate.

By the time the Bulldogs returned to Stampede Wrestling Bruce Hart had fallen out of favour with Stu, blamed for the chaotic state of the business on his watch. Still, the decision to give in to Dynamite's demands and try him out as booker was one the Harts would come to regret.

"He did love his guns," says Michelle Billington of her ex-husband. Indeed, Dynamite's favoured hobby, when not wrestling, playing evil ribs, and drinking himself silly, was another sign of his increasingly rampant nature.

With money pouring in during his WWF days, Dynamite had purchased a $220,000 ranch outside Calgary where he intended to raise his kids, his second child due May 1988. In the meantime, he turned the twenty acres around his home into a killing field. His toys included a sawed-off shot gun, a 30-30 Winchester rifle, and a nine-millimetre semi-automatic pistol – an arsenal fit for a drug raid. Dynamite enjoyed driving around his acreage, accompanied by his bullmastiffs and his wrestling buddies, blowing gophers to bits. Davey Boy Smith and Duke Myers were frequent visitors, as was Brian Peters, a wannabe wrestler who the Harts were training. Peters worked as a strong-arm for cocaine dealers, a job that eventually got him killed in May 1987.[8]

Michelle recalls the mock earnestness with which the boys took to the gopher hunt, competing to see who could get the most kills. "Somebody would shoot one," she says, "and Tom would shout 'Kill check!' There was so many carcasses that the eagles hadn't eaten yet, so you'd have to check every kill and make sure it was warm. Maybe you were just shooting a dead one and making it fly, right?"

One mate Dynamite couldn't invite to the hunt, however, was J.R. Foley. Around the time Dynamite was returning to Stampede Wrestling in 1988, Foley died of throat cancer. At the so-called General's funeral, Foley's daughter asked Dynamite to open the casket and ensure J.R. was being laid to rest in his favourite pair of cowboy boots, as he had requested. Dynamite did so, and said a private goodbye to the surrogate father whom he had tormented for so many years.

Dynamite Kid's booking did little to improve business, which was severely lagging. Despite its initial poor showing in Alberta, by the decade's end the WWF had caught fire and was gradually running Stampede Wrestling into the ground, as it had done to nearly every independent promotion in North America.

WWF shows at the Calgary Saddledome, held every few months, were selling out, drawing roughly fourteen thousand fans per visit. Even a live broadcast of the March 1987 WrestleMania III, shown on the big screen, attracted twelve thousand fans. Meanwhile, Stampede Wrestling was failing to sellout the two-thousand-seat Pavilion.

Stu was coming to terms with this new reality. He told *Alberta Report* that with the fast-paced lifestyle of the modern age, people had less time and inclination to attend weekly wrestling shows. They preferred to get their wrestling fix on TV and lay down their money every few months when the WWF came to town. "It's hard for us to compete with the big money show the WWF can put on, with fancy camera shots and cartoon-style wrestlers," Stu said. "I'm unaware of any independent promotion that is making money presently."[9]

Dynamite Kid did his best to turn the tide, using his WWF connections to recruit disgruntled stars – Harley Race, Corporal Kirchner, and Don Muraco among them – from the big league promotion, but they seldom stuck around long enough to make a difference. One can see why. Muraco had come from wrestling main events with Hulk Hogan to a promotion where a small-timer like Bruce Hart would try to tell him what to do.[10] He went from the huge paydays of the WWF to a place where wrestlers were racing to the bank on payday, hoping their meagre cheques wouldn't bounce.[11]

Milad Elzein, who says he worked for free for several months, remembers the day Muraco was handed a $150 cheque for a week's work. Dynamite was embarrassed and went to Stu to get more money for "Big Blue," as Muraco was known, but that didn't stop the wrestler from leaving the territory in a hurry.

Dynamite began to take his frustration with the promotion out on the Harts. Keith recalls a match where he and Bruce were teamed up against Dynamite and Johnny Smith. Keith was fighting Johnny when he was hit from behind with such force he was nearly knocked out cold. He reached behind his head and was startled by the bloody gash at his hairline. He later learned that Dynamite had struck him with the steel ring bell. "It was ruthless, gutless, and deliberate," Keith says, still bitter. "I thought we were friends … but after that I had no use for him."

One angle that should have boosted business on Dynamite's watch was the breakup of the British Bulldogs. The storyline, which mirrored reality, saw the former partners lashing out at one other, each believing they were responsible for the duo's success. Dynamite was again a heel, teaming up with John Hindley, who played Davey Boy's rogue cousin Johnny Smith. Chris Benoit was brought in as Davey's partner. The feud, hyped as "The Dog Fight of the Decade," promised to be one of the greats, but it was stifled by a number of factors, and particularly by Ed Whalen, who was dead set against the breakup of the Bulldogs. Exercising his power as executive producer, he edited a good deal of the action out of the TV show. Meanwhile, Dynamite's injuries continued to force him to the sidelines and, on a couple of occasions, he and Davey left for a few weeks at a time to tour Japan.[12] Every time "the dog fight" started picking up speed, it hit a roadblock.

To make matters worse, Owen Hart jumped ship for the WWF in July 1988, and Brian Pillman left shortly after. Some blamed the latter on friction between Pillman and Dynamite: Dynamite saw Pillman as a cocky punk who hadn't paid his dues.

Ultimately, Ross says, Dynamite had to be demoted from his position as booker. He was too much of a loose canon to manage the men, he was absent much of the time, and his booking concepts were not igniting the fan interest the Harts had anticipated. Again, Bruce was made the booker. To Dynamite, whose ego had already taken a hiding, this was a slap in the face. His spiteful rebellion culminated in an outright mutiny against Bruce on the infamous Yellowknife-Hay River trek, where Dynamite broke his former friend's jaw and looked like he might have Helen Hart's golden child lynched.

As Owen and Martha became husband and wife at Hart House, Bruce standing as best man with his jaw wired shut, Dynamite Kid sat in a Calgary strip club, drunk and belligerent.

He had been on the guest list for the July 1, 1989, wedding but was uninvited after the Hay River incident. Bruce refused to show up if Dynamite was there. Ever the diplomat, Ross tactfully asked Dynamite to work that Saturday in Edmonton. Somebody was needed to run the show, after all, and obviously none of the Harts could be there. Dynamite agreed but opted for a piss-up instead. Stu called him to ask where he had been, and Dynamite made up a transparent excuse about his car breaking down. Stu didn't say another word about it.[13] By this point, it was just another day at the helm of the rambling wreck his promotion had become.

Dynamite was becoming increasingly unreliable. His physical abilities were deteriorating, and the man who used to wrestle electrifying sixty-minute matches was now lucky if he could muster ten minutes in the ring. On some nights, he was unable to pull off his old moves and was hitting the bottle ever more frequently to drown his frustrations. No-shows like the one he pulled the day of Owen's wedding were now commonplace for Dynamite.

It was a day after the wedding, Ross says, that the crew set off for a gig in the resort town of Jasper, Alberta. Ross was driving the rental van, Davey Boy in the passenger's seat. Sitting behind them were Chris Benoit and Karl "Jason the Terrible" Moffat. Although it was summer, the roads were icy through the mountains, and Ross admits he was speeding. While negotiating a sharp curve in the road, the van hydroplaned. For a brief, terrifying moment, the lads thought they were going to plunge off the mountain. Instead, they crashed into a station wagon travelling toward them.

Ross, who was wearing his seat belt, emerged unscathed. Instinctively, he had stuck out his arm and stopped Benoit, who otherwise might have been rocketed through the windshield. Moffat, struck by a spare tire that flew up from the back of the van, was sprawled on the backseat screaming that his leg was broken. But it was Davey Boy who caught the worst of it. His head hit the windshield, shattering the glass and leaving him unconscious in his seat, his face covered in blood. Ross was panicked and began picking glass shards from his brother-in-law's head.*

Diana Hart remembers the phone call she received from her brother. "Diana, I don't know how to tell you this, but there has been a really bad accident," Ross sobbed. "Davey is unconscious. We can't wake him up. I wish to

*The driver of the station wagon shattered his femur.

hell it was me, not him. I'd give anything if it was me." She could hear Moffat shrieking in the background, "Davey's dead! Oh God, he's dead!"[14]

Davey was not dead, but he was out of action for the next five months. Diana says he took 135 stitches in his forehead and suffered two herniated discs at the top of his spine.

For Stu, it was another calamity, another reason to close up shop. But he stuck it out for a little while longer. He did so mainly because Owen had returned to the promotion after less than a year in the WWF, disillusioned after being stuck with the humiliating Blue Blazer gimmick. Owen had hoped to be a Canadian version of Japan's Tiger Mask. Instead, the Blazer character came off as a big goof sporting a feathered cape. As Dynamite put it, "He looked like a bloody parrot."[15] Fans responded less than enthusiastically to the Blue Blazer and the amazingly talented Owen found himself near the bottom of the cards. When Owen returned to Stampede Wrestling, Stu held out a final hope that his youngest son could turn the business around. A feud between Dynamite and Owen did do well, but not well enough.

Since Stu had revived Stampede Wrestling in 1985, Keith says, his dad had lost over $1 million. He was headed for the poorhouse if he didn't pull out. Helen's health had continued to decline and she begged him to get out of the business once and for all. Bruce, of course, cajoled him to stick it out. "My dad blew everything he made in wrestling trying to sustain it, running against Vince McMahon," Keith says. "In the end, I don't think he was even interested in running it, except as a career for Bruce and some of the boys."

At the end of 1989, Stu's promoter's licence from the Calgary Boxing and Wrestling Commission expired, as did his $2-million public liability insurance policy.[16] He wasn't prepared to spend huge amounts of money renewing either of them. He didn't have huge amounts of money.

By the first week of January 1990, Stampede Wrestling was officially finished. "Free at last," sighed Helen in an interview with the *Calgary Herald*. Bret summed up the end of the era: "The small wrestling business is obsolete."[17]

Chapter seventeen

Afterburn

The wrestling world was shocked on October 12, 1992, when, in a non-televised bout in Saskatoon's Saskatchewan Place arena, thirty-five-year-old Bret Hart was crowned the WWF World champion. He beat forty-three-year-old "Nature Boy" Ric Flair for the title, slapping his trademark submission hold, the sharpshooter, on the bleach-blond from Minnesota, making him howl for mercy. It was an amazing coup. While Hulk Hogan was the biggest draw in wrestling history, within the industry Flair was widely considered the all-time great. At six-foot-one and about 240 pounds, Flair fought with a down-and-dirty style, and his ring psychology was among the best in the business. In a twenty-year career, the flamboyant grappler won the NWA World title a record nine times and since arriving in the WWF had won that world championship twice.

Bret, on the other hand, who had switched from a heel to a babyface persona in the late 1980s, was an old-fashioned John Wayne–style hero. While he was as boastful as any wrestler – dubbing himself "the excellence of execution" and proclaiming himself "the best there is, the best there was, and the best there ever will be" – he also carried himself with a noble, Everyman quality. He was a positive role model, a proud family man with a wife and four kids, and certainly not a whiskey-drinking peacock like Flair or a larger than life superhero like Hogan. Consequently, Bret's win was a surprise, because in the modern wrestling world – where

Bret Hart suplexes T.G. Stone in the early 1980s.

it seemed only the flashiest stars could be on top – Bret represented the triumph of the common man.

Bret's work in the 1990s was nothing short of spectacular. After the Hart Foundation broke up in 1991, there was a fear "The Hitman" would flounder. Jim Neidhart certainly did. Without Bret in his corner, his star status was never the same. Some of that might have come down to Neidhart's excessive, self-destructive ways. Neidhart's wife Ellie alleged in court documents that he was a heavy drinker and drug abuser, allegations that were never proven. But whether he had a substance abuse problem or not, it's clear he had a frightening temper. In his *Calgary Sun* column, Bret recalls an incident when Neidhart hurled a TV monitor at one of Vince McMahon's top employees. He was soon shown the door, though McMahon eventually brought him back.[1]

Bret, however, found himself on the fast track to singles success. He won the prestigious Intercontinental title and feuded with such top names as Rowdy Roddy Piper, Curt Hennig, and his brother-in-law Davey Boy Smith, who made it back to the WWF in 1991. Bret's match with Davey, before nearly seventy-nine thousand fans at London's Wembley Stadium, remains a classic.

Bret also had some of the best matches of his career with Owen. After failing to get into the Calgary Fire Department, the youngest Hart returned to the WWF in late 1991 but again had a hard time finding his niche. Despite his outstanding talents, as a babyface Owen just seemed too plain for WWF fans. Ironically, the squeaky-clean family man finally clicked in 1994 when he became a heel.

The angle was brilliant and for a moment it felt like a Stampede Wrestling reunion, with Keith and Bruce making a brief WWF appearance, teaming up with their brothers against Shawn Michaels and three masked wrestlers. Even Stu, then seventy-nine years old, was part of the action, coaching his boys at ringside. The match ended with Owen, supposedly jealous of Bret's success, turning on the family. Helen hated this plot twist, uncomfortable seeing the family portrayed as being so dysfunctional and fractious.

The Owen-Bret feud lasted for close to a year, with both brothers shining. Owen excelled as a heel, playing a petulant brat whose nose was out of joint from years of living in his superstar brother's shadow. "I've always been better than you, Bret!" he'd rant in interviews, an exaggerated pout on his face. "Mom always loved you best!" In the course of their feud, Owen defeated Bret at WrestleMania X in Madison Square Garden. He also cost Bret the world title in a November 1994 match when he tricked Helen – somehow McMahon had got even her involved – into throwing in the towel during Bret's match with Bob Backlund.

Stu and Helen were incorporated into a few storylines in the 1990s, highlighted by heckling announcer Jerry "The King" Lawler. "You know, Stu Hart is so old, I told him to act his age and he dropped dead," Lawler told the audience. "And Helen Hart … she's the only person I know with an autographed copy of the Bible." Helen thought Lawler was hilarious.

While Bret's talent was indisputable, he also happened to be in the right place at the right time. In the early 1990s, McMahon was coming under heavy fire from both the media and the U.S. government for rampant steroid abuse within his organization. In response, he pushed a clean-cut but cool athletic type as his star, rather than another steroid monster. Bret fit the role to a tee. As well, business was down for the WWF. People were tiring of the over-the-top elements of the Hogan era. Bret represented the organization putting the focus back on wrestlers and away from cartoonish characters.

Bret would go on to capture the WWF World title five times in the 1990s. Most wrestling historians agree he is the greatest Canadian wrestler ever; indeed, one of the world's greats. No other Canadian grappler has been as recognized or popular on a global scale. In 1991, *Alberta Report* declared Bret the most famous Albertan in the world.

Bret's critics point out that he was not a huge money-maker for the WWF in the way that Hulk Hogan or "Stone Cold" Steve Austin were, but he was extremely popular in foreign markets, getting mobbed when he toured Europe. He was the face of the WWF at a time when fifteen million Americans watched the show weekly and it was broadcast in forty countries. At his peak during the '90s, Bret was a pop culture icon, immortalized on *The Simpsons*, appearing on Howard Stern's radio show, and being invited to the White House three times.

"He's got a tremendous amount of charisma," said a WWF spokesperson in November 1992. "It's hard to put your finger on, but he's got something that turns people on and that goes a long way in this business. There's sex appeal there for the women, the adult males respect his athletic ability, and, the kids view him as the coolest thing on two feet."[12]

Bret's rise was the one bright light in a dark decade for the Hart family and many Stampede Wrestling graduates. While Bret's star rocketed into the heavens, Dynamite Kid's came crashing to earth just as dramatically, bringing him right back to the gloomy English coal mining town of his birth a broken man.

Dynamite was never an easy man to be married to. He had a mean streak, intensified by drugs, and for all his hard-man talk he had insecurities, which

caused him to routinely lash out at Michelle. When she read in front of him, it reminded him that he had dropped out of school at the age of fourteen and he would shout at her that she was being rude.

Michelle didn't realize the chronic pain her husband was struggling with until his back gave out at the end of 1986. He had never acknowledged it: to do so would have been weak. She remembers having to change the bedsheets every morning, as they would be soaked in sweat. One day she asked Dynamite why he sweated so much in the night. He exploded. "Because I'm in pain, ya fookin' cow!"

Despite all the money Dynamite made, the Billingtons' bank account was depleting at an alarming rate. With Dynamite's fast lifestyle on the road, he spent cash as quickly as he earned it, and he was generous to a fault with people he liked, buying them leather jackets and expensive meals on a whim. He continued to do so even when he stopped working.

When Dynamite's doctor warned him he would wind up in a wheelchair if he kept wrestling, Michelle convinced her husband that they should sell their country estate, to put some money in the bank. "That means I'm a failure," he spat.

"No," Michelle replied. "It means you're cashing in on an investment."

She was right. The couple sold the property for $475,000, coming out of the deal a quarter of a million dollars richer. They purchased five acres near the town of Cochrane, just outside Calgary. Moving day was horrific. Dynamite, who just had his shoulder operated on, was supposed to be in the hospital when the movers came. Instead, wasted on painkillers, he showed up to oversee things, drinking all the while. Michelle is not certain what set him off, but she remembers Dynamite jerking his arm violently, trying to throw out his freshly operated-on shoulder in an impotent rage, just to upset her. When he calmed down, she pleaded with him, "You don't have to wrestle anymore. Our house is paid off. You could work at a gas station even. I'll get a job. We'll thrive." Tom would have none of it.

Living with the legend that was Dynamite Kid had become an around-the-clock nightmare. "He was in turmoil," Michelle says. "He'd sit at home getting drunk [and] watching all his old wrestling tapes." Sometimes Dynamite left the house, saying he was off to rent a movie or run some errand. He would disappear with the car and not return for a couple of days. It was winter, and his wife was left stranded out in the country with two children.

The hatred that mired Dynamite's heart thickened when at the last minute Davey Boy backed out of a lucrative Japanese tour the duo had planned for the end of 1990. His reason? Vince McMahon wanted the Bulldogs back.

Dynamite told McMahon off, according to Diana Hart, while Davey Boy jumped at the opportunity. Dynamite considered this a betrayal and had felt nothing but bitterness for Davey from then on.[3]

Michelle hoped that a visit from Dynamite's mother and younger brother would lift his spirits, but it made things worse. Mark Billington was sixteen and Dynamite dreamed of turning him into the new Dynamite Kid. He began training Mark, but Mark, who had a weak heart, did not have the stamina. "He's not got the mettle," Dynamite said later, disappointed.

Maybe Mark couldn't wrestle like his brother, but they did have some things in common, Michelle says. Soon, they were going to bars and strip clubs together, getting into fights and lapping up the booze and drugs diet so common in the wrestling world.

For Michelle, the breaking point came on New Year's Eve, 1990. Pregnant, she was at home watching a movie with six-year-old Bronwyne and two-year-old Marek Thomas when Dynamite came home. He had a bloody gash in his cheek, so deep that Michelle could see bone. "Git fookin' dressed," he commanded her. "We're going out." Michelle had always managed to shield the kids from their dad when he was drunk. Seeing her father drunk and bloody upset Bronwyne. "What's wrong with daddy?" she cried. "I fookin' fell down, little girl," Dynamite said. "That's all ye need to know."

The truth was that he had been in a fight at Cochrane's Texas Gate bar. The bouncers had asked Dynamite to pay a $5 cover charge and he refused. He bullied his way in, aggravating every soused cowboy in the joint. The real trouble began when someone made a crack about Dynamite wearing his sunglasses in the bar. He had been wearing his shades everywhere since he had started having violent seizures as a result of his drug binges. Before the seizures struck, Dynamite saw a flash of bright light. He thought that wearing sunglasses would ward off the light and protect him from the seizures. But the cowboys thought he was being arrogant. They took exception to everything about this loud asshole who had barged into their saloon. They took Dynamite down. A few boots to the face later, he was thrown out the door.

Undeterred, Dynamite decided to round up his wife, even though he knew she was five months pregnant and wanted to stay home. They were going to celebrate New Year's Eve whether she liked it or not. Michelle took the kids to a babysitter, Dynamite crudely taped up his face, and off they went to the Cochrane Hotel bar.

Dynamite and Michelle ushered in 1991 at each others' throats. What was he doing getting into fights? Why did he insist on getting his brother

in fights night after night? "Oh, my God," Michelle screamed, in tears. "How are you going to raise my son?"

"Little Tommy'll be watchin' me fookin' back!" Dynamite snarled.

No. Never. Her son would not be raised like that. "I had been an enabler and an eggshell walker," says Michelle. "It was time for damage control."

The couple had $3,000 in their bank account in January 1991. Michelle spent $2,000 on a one-way ticket to England, which she left on the kitchen table for Dynamite. She refutes the claim made in his book that he left her $30,000. He took the ticket and left Calgary on January 10, 1991, with twenty pounds sterling in his pocket, the exact amount he had in it when he first came to Calgary as a skinny, clean-living kid nearly thirteen years earlier.

Terrified, Michelle had loaded up the kids and gone to seek refuge at a women's shelter, believing that Dynamite would hunt her down. "He always said he'd cut up my face so that no man would ever look at me," she says. "I thought he'd kill me." Her voice quivers a little and she hangs her head, adding, "There was a time when I thought of taking my life and my kid's lives, rather than thinking of a future with him."

Today, Michelle and her children live in a modest home in northwest Calgary. On the front doorstep sits a statuette of a bulldog. Fittingly, the thing is damaged, old, and faded. One ear is broken off. At twenty-one, Bronwyne, a striking blond, is an aspiring deejay. Marek, seventeen, is thin and studious. Michelle and Dynamite's youngest child, Amarys, who was born after Dynamite left Calgary, is the most like him. At fourteen, she's tough and athletic, just like the father she's never met. She loves going to the gym and even talks about becoming a wrestler. Bad News Allen has offered to train her. Her father would not be thrilled. "He never approved of lady wrestlers," Michelle says.

Michelle went to school after Dynamite left and got her bachelor of education degree. She is now a teacher and able to make ends meet, but there were years when she could not. Fortunately, her brother-in-law Bret was always there for her. He bought the kids clothes, paid the bills when the electricity was about to be cut off, even took the family on holidays.

In 1995, Bret flew Bronwyne and Marek to England to see their father. He was working as a security guard at a metal-scrap yard in Wigan, living with his girlfriend on the grounds. For the most part, it was a nice visit, with Dynamite making an effort to get to know his kids. The rekindled relationship would be a short one, however.

In December of that year, the Hart boys organized a tribute to Stu at the Corral in honour of his eightieth birthday. The Harts tried to get Dynamite to attend. Bruce had a plane ticket waiting for Dynamite at the airport in England.

The kids were excited, but when they went to pick their father up at the Calgary airport, he wasn't there. Later, over the phone, he told Michelle that he had lost too much muscle and was too embarrassed to come. "I don't think he's a bad person who doesn't want to see his kids," Michelle says. "It's pride. His pride has always been a crippling thing for him. It's his worst enemy."

Things would only get worse for Dynamite Kid. Much of his post-Calgary life is shrouded in mystery, but horror stories abound. In his autobiography, Dynamite says he was wrestling in some cut-rate English promotion in 1991, billed as the British Bulldog Dynamite Kid, when he was hassled by the Trade Descriptions Office for using the moniker. By that time, Davey Boy was being billed as the British Bulldog in the WWF, and Dynamite claims Davey had a problem with his former partner using the name. In 1994, Dynamite attended a British wrestling match where Davey Boy was topping the bill. He tried to storm the dressing room to pick a fight with his cousin but was forced out of the building by police.[4]

Tom kept trying to return to the ring, finally giving up in 1996 when he had a seizure and was hospitalized during a Japan tour. Dynamite also told Michelle that throughout the '90s he earned money as a garage fighter. "They'd put Tom and the toughest guy in town in someone's garage and shut the door," Michelle says. "When they opened it up whoever was still standing would win the money.... Men would place bets on them."

It all caught up with Dynamite in 1997 when he was finally confined to a wheelchair. He remarried at one point, but he's said to be divorced again and destitute. In 2004, news circulated that Dynamite had part of his leg amputated and was hospitalized. Michelle tried unsuccessfully to contact him. If she was to contact him, though, it's unlikely Billington would be repentant or show any regret for the life he's led. His autobiography, published in 2001, suggests he'll go down bulldogged and prideful to the end.

"I had no idea things would end up the way they did," he writes. "But I'd do it all again. I wouldn't change a thing. Which I know sounds strange coming from a guy whose wrestling career put him in a wheelchair, but it's true. Wrestling was my life, and I loved it. No regrets. I had a blast."[5]

On the surface, the early 1990s were a dream come true for Davey Boy Smith. For a time, he was one of the top wrestling stars in the world. It was everything he wanted.

But the decade also had its share of catastrophes for the British Bulldog. For him, the year after Stampede Wrestling closed was dark and dangerous. Davey was wrestling sporadically, not fully recovered from injuries suffered

from his 1989 car accident, and he needed money badly. He had a mortgage to pay and a wife and two children to support. To do so, Diana Hart says, he borrowed money from a fearsome drug dealer named Hermesh Erach Austin. In return, Davey allowed Austin to store stolen vehicles in his yard, Diana alleges.[6]

Austin, a tattooed bodybuilder of Persian heritage, first entered the scene in the early 1980s while a teenager, working at the juice bar in BJ's Gym. At some point, Austin began dealing drugs, and in September 1990, both Austin and Alison Hart's ex-husband, Ben Bassarab, were charged with possession of steroids for the purpose of trafficking. Those charges were dropped, but both men were sentenced to eighteen months in prison for beating the man who burned them on a drug deal.

Kevin Sluth, an associate of Austin and Bassarab, had been holding over 450 grams of cocaine for his friends in the summer of 1990. He was snorting the drug in his apartment when he heard a knock at the door. In a coke-fuelled panic, he flushed $30,000 worth of cocaine down the toilet, only to find it was just a TV cable repairman at his door. Five days later, Bassarab and Austin pummelled Sluth in front of his terrified girlfriend. Sluth went to the police, who sent him back to the two sharks, this time fitted with a wiretap, which led to their conviction.[7]

Bassarab says he disassociated himself with Austin after completing his sentence. Diana Hart says she doesn't know the extent of her husband Davey's association with Austin, but she felt uneasy in the summer of 1990 when he began riding a Harley Davidson Soft Tail given to him by the drug dealer. According to Diana, when Austin was arrested he ordered Davey to sell the bike, as he needed money for his defence. "Davey did what he was told," Diana writes. "You didn't fool around with these guys."[8] In 1991, Davey also cut off his association with Austin when he hastily moved his family to Florida.

In January 1994, Austin, by then running a $2.5-million cocaine operation, was convicted of first-degree murder in the death of Gregory Kungel, who had gone missing in September 1990. The story that unfolded is as sinister as it is grisly.

Austin and his henchmen abducted Kungel, twenty-four, and tortured the man for a week, believing he had stolen more than $10,000 from Austin. Kungel was taken to a warehouse in southeast Calgary where, as he pled for his life, he was savagely beaten. His hands were crushed in a vice, his ears cut with scissors, and the soles of his feet burned with a blowtorch. Finally, Austin and his henchmen took Kungel to the outskirts of Calgary, where Austin slit his throat and shot him in the head. Kungel's body was then buried.

Two and a half years later, one of Austin's cronies went to the police. The evidence was sufficient to put Austin in prison with a life sentence.[9]

Associating with monsters wasn't Davey's only problem in the 1990s. On July 25, 1993, back in Calgary for a visit, he and Diana were partying at a rock bar called The Back Alley when Davey got into a fight that nearly landed him behind bars for up to fourteen years. Trouble began when a twenty-year-old student drunkenly approached Diana on the dance floor and made lewd comments. Eyewitness accounts differ dramatically. Some suggest that Davey picked the man up and spiked him head first into the concrete floor. Davey claimed that he put the troublemaker in a headlock and walked him over to the bouncers. When he let go, the man fell backwards and cracked his head on the floor. Either way, the man suffered brain damage, including memory loss, from the ordeal.[10]

At one point during the trial for assault, Davey tried to play down his strength, telling the court wrestling was fake. Wrestler Karl Moffat countered that claim, testifying that Davey was a powerhouse capable of throwing any normal-sized man like a rag doll.[11] Ultimately, however, the judge ruled in Davey's favour. But winning the case did not come cheap. According to Diana, it cost the family about U.S.$500,000 to defend the Bulldog.[12]

As the decade progressed, Davey's drug abuse began to spiral out of control, with a morphine addiction added to his usual menu of steroids and painkillers. The quality of the Bulldog's work began to deteriorate. His agility and ring finesse long gone, he had become just another musclehead in the ring.

In 1998, Davey was working for media mogul Ted Turner's World Championship Wrestling (WCW), which dominated the wrestling business at the time. Turner had the money to hire McMahon's top talents out from under him, the most notable of the bunch being Hulk Hogan. For a long time, the WWF floundered, its Monday night *Raw Is War* TV program getting creamed in the ratings by WCW's *Monday Nitro* for eighty-three straight weeks, from late 1996 to early 1998.

But behind the scenes, WCW – as led by its president Eric Bischoff – was in a constant state of chaos. The notorious Bischoff had his clique of favourites, including Hogan, but others claim they were mismanaged and mistreated. Davey suffered the worst injury of his career in WCW when he was power-slammed onto a steel trapdoor underneath the canvas, which no one told him was there. He jarred his back on the door's handle. The injury put him out of action for several months, during which he sat idle at home, often driven to tears by the pain in his spine, which he compared to being stabbed with a knife.[13]

Facing such chronic agony, Davey fell even deeper into his addictions. He stumbled around the house, slurring his words. During Sunday dinners at Hart House he was barely able to feed himself. Diana brought a water pistol to the table and squirted her husband every time he dropped his fork, but he was too stoned to notice. Diana's sisters berated her for the way she was treating her husband. "Am I the only person here who notices he can't feed himself?" she protested.[14]

One night in despair, Diana tried to take her own life. As Davey lay on their bed, incapacitated, Diana screamed at him, "Look what you've done, you bastard…! I'm going to take your goddamn pills so you'll know what I put up with night and day. I want you to know what it's like to live with a vegetable." As she swallowed an entire bottle of Xanax, a drug used to counter anxiety, Davey mumbled at her in a daze, "Please don't." Diana regretted her actions almost immediately. Realizing she did not want to die, she managed to call 911 before passing out. When she woke up, a day later, she was in the hospital.[15]

"She's never been the same since," says Keith. "I don't know whether something snapped emotionally, or if it was the pills … but she's never had that same sparkle and confidence she used to have. She was a very poised, charming person with a lot of potential. Since then … I think things are a little bit out of focus for her."

Davey Boy checked himself into a seven-week rehabilitation program in Grande Prairie, Alberta, on Boxing Day, 1998. When Davey collapsed in the rehab centre, wracked by the hellfire burning in his spine, he was transferred to Calgary's Rockyview General Hospital. There, he was given a bone scan. It showed he had three crushed discs in his back that, having gone untreated, had developed a life-threatening infection. The next thing Davey knew, he was laid up in a cast from his waist to his neck. For weeks he lay there, drowning in misery. The bitterness was compounded when he received his termination notice from WCW.[16]

Davey could not accept that his wrestling career was coming to an end. As soon as he was out of the hospital he was back in the gym, back on the steroids, and in talks with McMahon about returning to the WWF. He also returned to painkillers and morphine. But the drugs weren't his greatest addiction. "I'm an addict to wrestling," he told a reporter. "I've been down but I've always returned to the ring. It's the only thing I know."[17]

Tragedy dogged the Hart family in the 1990s, dealing blow after devastating blow at an unrelenting pace. First there was the death of wild-child Dean Hart in November 1990, the fifth-born Hart son succumbing to a heart attack

brought on by his kidney disease at the age of thirty-six. Then there was the horrific demise of Stu and Helen's thirteen-year-old grandson Matthew Annis in July 1996. Annis, the son of Georgia and B.J., was already dreaming of becoming a wrestler, training with his young cousins in the Harts' backyard ring, when a minor injury left him unable to walk. At the hospital, it was discovered that Matthew had flesh-eating disease. "One day he was fine," says Nattie Neidhart, Jim and Ellie's daughter. "Twelve days later, he had thirty pounds of puss on his body and looked like a gorilla.... His blood had risen to the surface and his skin was like burnt wood." Crushed, the family rallied around Matthew's bedside. Owen promised to hand his nephew the keys to his 1967 Mustang when the kid recovered. Matthew died within two weeks, on July 14.

"We were all so tight then," says Alison. "I was so proud of my family. We pulled together. If somebody looked at the Harts then, they would have said 'God, these people are amazing.' We took care of each other."

Another death rocked the family and the wrestling world in October 1997. Brian Pillman was like a brother to the Hart children and his downward spiral was painful for them to watch. During a seven-year stint in WCW, Pillman had developed a loose-canon persona that caught on with the fans, making him a hot property. His friends worried about him, though, as his behaviour outside the ring was also becoming erratic.[18]

Pillman had always been a wild man, but in recent years things had gone off the deep end. After a nasty breakup with his cocaine-addicted girlfriend Rochelle, with whom he had a daughter, Pillman married a former Penthouse Pet, Melanie, and the couple sued for custody of Pillman's child and won. Depressed at her loss, Rochelle shot herself in the head while talking to her mother on the phone. Pillman, tortured with guilt, began drinking heavily and abusing his pain medication.

By 1996, Pillman was at the centre of a bidding war between Vince McMahon and Eric Bischoff. Pillman had been up for two days straight considering both offers, which were around $400,000 a year, when he hopped in his Humvee, hoping a drive would clear his head. Instead, he fell asleep at the wheel and hit a tree. He later claimed that just before his eyes closed, he saw Rochelle's ghostly face in his rear-view mirror. The crash propelled him through the windshield, sending him flying forty feet into a field. He woke up in the hospital with four steel plates in his face and a crushed right ankle needing restructuring.[19]

Pillman lied to McMahon, whose offer he accepted, claiming that doctors told him he would recover completely. After surgery Pillman's ankle

Makhan Singh (Mike Shaw), who fans liked to call "The Toilet Bowl," applies a nerve pinch to heartthrob Brian Pillman.

fused into a walking position and he was never again able to perform to his past level. To even enter the ring he began to rely on dangerously heavy doses of painkillers.

Pillman's final days were chaos, with his wife Melanie filing for divorce and Pillman violating a restraining order, which got him thrown into court-mandated anger management classes. He and Melanie got back together, however, and she was at home cooking dinner for their children when she received news that Pillman had been found dead in a Minnesota hotel room. Heart failure was listed as the official cause of his October 6, 1996, death, with cocaine a contributing factor. Several bottles of painkillers and muscle relaxants were found near the body.[20]

Critics blasted McMahon when, during a broadcast of *Raw Is War* the following night, he featured a live interview with a teary-eyed Melanie Pillman from her home in Walton, Kentucky, guaranteeing huge ratings. The vicious war between the WWF and WCW had reached a mean-spirited low.

Was it the art of pro wrestling or was it just trash? It was getting harder to tell all the time and Bret Hart didn't like it.

By 1997, Vince McMahon had finally found a way to turn the tides in the war he had been losing against WCW. The answer was simple. Turn up the sleaze.

There's no question the WWF had grown stale in the early part of the decade. The age-old good versus evil shtick didn't resonate with the new jaded generation of wrestling fans. These kids grew up on Guns 'N' Roses, gangsta rap, Mike Tyson, Beavis and Butthead, and blood-sport video games. Eminem, *South Park*, and Girls Gone Wild videos were just around the corner. The voyeuristic, lowbrow *Jerry Springer Show* was becoming the hottest talk show on TV. This was a world of strippers, violence, and anti-heroes.

Nobody wanted to see a humongous Boy Scout preaching to the kiddies, telling them to go to school and eat their vitamins, as Hulk Hogan had done. In fact, over in WCW, Hogan had grown a black beard, told his fans to go to hell, and turned into the villainous Hollywood Hulk Hogan. As for the WWF's cartoonish aspects, even the kids knew how hokey and pandering the gimmicks were getting when the federation introduced an evil clown to the ring called Doink, who would be accompanied by his look-alike midget sidekick, Dink.

However, Bret was uncomfortable with the new breed of hero McMahon was developing. A guy like "The Heartbreak Kid" Shawn Michaels was number one on The Hitman's hitlist. Michael Shawn Hickenbottom, from Texas,

was a superb performer – acrobatic, charismatic, and more than willing to risk his neck pulling off dangerous stunts. He was also a cocky prima donna, both in the dressing room and in the ring, where he took his rock 'n' roll sex symbol act to extremes, dancing like a stripper, spreading his legs and feigning an exaggerated karate chop to his genitals. "Suck it," he told the fans, young men lapping it up as if Michaels were the coolest dude on the planet.

When the two met at WrestleMania XII, on March 31, 1996, in Anaheim, California, their differences could not have been more pronounced. World champion Bret marched down the aisle, paused at ringside, took off his wraparound shades, and put them on his six-year-old son, Blade. Michaels, on the other hand, flew in from the rafters, sliding along on a high wire attached to a safety harness, amid fireworks and flashing lights. He wore a glittering, silvery tuxedo that fit him like a second skin and, once in the ring, he broke into a peacock strut.

The two warriors fought a dramatic sixty-two-minute bout that was dubbed an "iron man" match. These types of epic battles had mostly gone the way of the dinosaur in modern wrestling – the audience just didn't have the attention span for such contests in the post-MTV era – but Hart and Michaels had the talent and chemistry to make such a match work. The Hitman dropped the title to Michaels that night.

Bret didn't mind. He planned to pursue a career as an actor, having already appeared in the network TV western *Lonesome Dove*, accepting a full-time role in the coming season. Those dreams were shattered when the series was cancelled. Bret became the prize in a tug-of-war between WCW and WWF. WCW offered Bret a contract in which he was guaranteed $3 million a year for three years, making him the highest paid wrestler in the world after Hulk Hogan. Bret was tempted but remained loyal to the company that had put him on top. Hart returned to the WWF, signing a twenty-year contract that stipulated he wrestle for the first three years, at $1.5 million a year, then move into a prominent management position.

Prodded by McMahon, Bret turned heel in 1997, adopting an American-bashing angle where he berated U.S. audiences for their declining moral values. He told the Americans their sick society should be flushed down the toilet. It enraged fans in the United States, but his popularity grew in Canada and around the world. Bret felt uneasy about the angle – his mother was an American – but he went along with the storyline, which included the formation of a new and improved Hart Foundation, this time with a whole gang that included Neidhart, Davey Boy, Owen, and Brian Pillman, not three months before Pillman died. As despised as they were south of the border,

they were a dream team to fans of the old Stampede Wrestling.

At the 1997 Calgary Stampede, when the Hart Foundation faced off against a team of American wrestlers led by "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, the hometown crowd erupted with pride. Stu and Helen were ringside and, before the match, Bret stopped and placed his shades on his mother. After the Canadians thumped the Americans, three generations of the Hart family climbed into the ring to join the wrestlers. The show of love from the crowd was thunderous.

Bret's feud with Austin marked a turning point in wrestling history, as it brought about a radical shift in the dynamics of the business. Austin, a bald, goateed bruiser known as "The Texas Rattlesnake," had been developing an image that would have made him a surefire heel not ten years ago. He was a beer-guzzling, gun-toting, white trash bully. While he was originally pushed as a villain, the crowd, many of whom identified with Austin, began cheering him on.

To make him a full-fledged hero, McMahon put Austin up against Bret. The two fought an exciting submission match at WrestleMania XIII in March 1997, in which the only way one could win was by making his opponent cry uncle. The battle ended with Austin screaming in agony in the centre of the ring, locked in Bret's sharpshooter as blood flowed from his brow. Instead of quitting, Stone Cold clung to life, finally passing out from the pain as his legs were twisted like pretzels. Losing like that gave Austin a badge of honour in the eyes of the fans. He was now established as the "baddest sonofabitch" in the game, and his popularity skyrocketed. He became the WWF's hottest commodity since Hulk Hogan.

The new "attitude" era of professional wrestling was in full swing. Before long, the WWF was a sleazy circus dominated by grapplers who played porno stars and pimps. One wrestler, calling himself The Godfather, routinely led a "ho train" of scantily clad beauties to the ring with him, proudly proclaiming, "pimpin' ain't easy!" Suddenly, the profile of women wrestlers was higher than ever before, only most of them didn't know the first thing about wrestling. They were half-naked bimbos with silicon D-cups posing as wrestlers, fighting in giant Jello bowls and bra-and-panty matches. Co-announcer Jerry Lawler leered in the background, hoping the women would expose their "puppies." Old Ed Whalen would have been disgusted. In fact, he was, and spoke out against modern wrestling on radio shows and newspaper columns.

Media pundits and pop sociologists swarmed, denouncing the new wrestling as a destructive influence on children and another sign that society was in the doghouse. Bret, who shared his father's love for traditional wrestling,

was feeling increasingly alienated in this world and he too slammed the new direction. "It's fine to have Jerry Springer or Howard Stern, but they don't cater to kids," he said. "[The WWF] has built their company on the backs of young kids.... It's really awful."[21]

It was never clearer that Bret no longer fit into McMahon's master plan than when McMahon told him the company was in financial peril and could no longer afford to pay him as per his contract. McMahon encouraged Bret to explore his options with WCW. Hurt, Bret did just that, and found that Turner's company was willing to put its original offer back on the table.

Meanwhile, Bret was again holding the WWF World Heavyweight title and was going to have to lose it before he left the company. When McMahon suggested he drop it to Shawn Michaels at the November 1997 Survivor Series in Montreal, Bret refused. Animosity between The Hitman and Heartbreak Kid was at a fever pitch. That June, Michaels crowed in an interview that while Bret held himself up as a role model, he didn't live up to the image on the road. He then made a crack about Hart seeing "a lot of sunny days lately." Wrestling fans and insiders understood that Michaels was referring to Tammy Lynn Sytch, better known as Sunny, a smouldering blond wrestling manager who had won a 1996 "Slammy Award" for Best Buns.

Backstage gossip had it that Bret and Sunny were having an affair, which Bret hotly denied. The rumours must have caused marital problems for Bret because he confronted Michaels in the dressing room and told him the personal comments were affecting his family life. Michaels lipped off. Before he knew it, Bret was on top of him, laying in the punches. When management dragged Bret off the now black-and-blue-faced Michaels, he took with him a fistful of the wrestler's long mane.

Bret's critics slam him for his refusal to drop the belt to Michaels when McMahon ordered him to do so. In one sense, this was prima donna behaviour on Bret's part, no different than if a Stampede wrestler defied one of Stu's orders back in the day. However, Stu would certainly not have handled the situation in the underhanded fashion that McMahon did, and, in Bret's defence, his contract gave him full creative control over his character for his last thirty days in the WWF. There was no way he was going to lose to that low-life Michaels – who had taken to wiping his crotch and blowing his nose with the Canadian flag – in a televised match in front of Canadian fans.[22]

Bret suggested that he drop the belt to Michaels on another night and came up with a finish where Michaels would put Bret in his signature sharpshooter hold which, after a painful struggle, Bret would break out of. Then, his Hart Foundation cronies would run to the ring and interfere. The match

would end in a disqualification, and Bret would hang on to his title that night. In a conversation with McMahon, which Bret secretly taped for *Wrestling with Shadows,* the documentary that was being made on him, McMahon agreed to this scenario.

That's not the way it went down. Instead, Bret was the victim of "The Montreal Screw-job," the most notorious double-cross in wrestling history. At the end of a hard-fought match, Michaels slipped the sharpshooter on Bret as planned. Bret winced, clenched his fists, and gritted his teeth, working the fans into a froth by playing up his apparent pain. He was about to reverse the hold as planned when he heard a voice bark, "Ring the fucking bell." It was McMahon. The bell rang and referee Earl Hebner declared Michaels the winner, as if The Hitman had submitted. He hadn't.

Realizing that danger was imminent, Michaels grabbed the title and scurried away like a rodent with a mouthful of cheese. Bret appeared momentarily stunned, then shot a vicious glare McMahon's way. McMahon gave Bret a look of arrogant defiance. On camera, Bret spat in McMahon's face and proceeded to smash thousands of dollars' worth of TV monitors as the Montreal fans howled their approval. Owen, Davey Boy, and Neidhart ran to the ring and pulled Bret away.

Backstage, Bret confronted Shawn, who swore he wasn't in on the plan. McMahon had locked himself in his office. Mark "The Undertaker" Callaway knocked on the door and angrily told McMahon he owed Bret an apology. Accompanied by his beefy son, Shane, and two road agents, McMahon approached Bret, who was towelling off after a shower. McMahon tried to explain himself but Bret warned McMahon to leave before he got a "punch in the fucking mouth." McMahon stood his ground.[23]

"It was time for me to punch him or walk out of the room," Bret said later. "I walked out and then it hit me clear. I could never live with that. I ran back and punched him. One shot. I popped him like a cork and when he fell down, he actually collapsed on his own ankle. I think he sprained it. I broke my right hand in three places. But it was the best thing I ever did. No regrets at all…."[24] Bret later described the punch as "a Stu Hart judgement call."[25]

McMahon's son jumped on Bret's back and Davey Boy dragged him off. The fight was over. McMahon's goons hauled him to his feet as he grumbled incoherently, his lower lip swelling. "Get this motherfucker out of here, or I'll hurt him," Bret said, his voice cracking with emotion.

By most accounts, Owen Hart wanted out of the WWF after his brother was betrayed. According to Owen's widow, Martha, he went to McMahon and asked

to be released from his contract, which paid him close to U.S.$300,000 a year.[26]

McMahon allowed Davey Boy to break his contract (Davey claimed he paid a $100,000 fine to do so), and Neidhart, who was working without one, was able to walk away with no restrictions.[27] They followed Bret to WCW, where, amid the nasty dressing room politics, their careers nose-dived, and Davey received the back injury that nearly ended his career permanently. Owen could have gone to WCW just as easily, but McMahon would not allow it: McMahon had plans for him. "Owen felt like a prisoner," Martha writes, "caught between his love for his brother and his livelihood."[28]

At first, Bret was angry with Owen for staying, but soon he begrudgingly accepted that his little brother had a family to support. Meanwhile, McMahon tried to settle Owen's discontent by upping his contract to U.S.$400,000 a year. Even with the substantial raise, Owen struggled to find a place in the new WWF where he could excel without having to compromise himself. Martha writes that in one proposed angle, Owen was to wrestle a creepy, homoerotic wrestler called Goldust, who would put his hand on Owen's crotch during the match. Owen shot the idea down.[29]

Owen eventually partnered with wrestler Jeff Jarrett. The two men came to the ring accompanied by their valet, Debra Marshall, yet another busty blond WWF diva. For the hooting boys in the audience, Debra was the star of the team, stripping down to her bra and panties in every match. A storyline was cooked up in which Owen would have an affair with Debra, who was supposedly Jarrett's girlfriend, thus starting a feud between the two men. "It was sick," Martha writes. That idea too was vetoed.

Finally, the Blue Blazer gimmick that Owen hated so much in his first WWF stint was resurrected. Owen was back in the blue mask and feathery cape. This time, though, the Blazer was played for laughs. The character was a parody of the goody-two-shoes superheroes who had populated the WWF only a few years earlier. Goofing on Hulk Hogan, the Blazer would tell kids to say their prayers and eat their vitamins. This crowd, however, preferred to see Steve Austin guzzle a six-pack and stick his middle finger in Vince McMahon's face.*

Martha writes: "Wrestling fans had become so putrid and tainted thanks to the angry mob mentality bred by Vince McMahon, that Blue Blazer was spit upon and degraded on a nightly basis."[30] Martha's horror is understandable,

*McMahon skilfully capitalized on the hatred fans had for him after his falling out with Bret by making himself a character in the ongoing story: the evil, bullying boss. His war with the rebellious Austin was the biggest feud of 1998–1999.

but Owen was doing his job and doing it well, goading the fans as heels had from the earliest days of the game. Only now, the playing field had become a crueller place. Still, it was a game Owen chose to continue playing. But his reservations were apparent in an interview he did with TSN on December 1998. "We are pushing the risqué button," he said, measuring his words carefully. "It's getting violent and a little cruder than I want. I make sure what I do as a pro athlete both in and out of the ring is acceptable to my family and my friends."[31]

Meanwhile, Bret was having trouble adjusting to WCW. As if the dressing room politics weren't bad enough, there was also a lack of focus on the part of the booking committee. Rather than developing storylines for the characters, they engineered wacky angles, abandoning them after a week or two, moving onto the next nowhere plot twist. It became difficult to follow the story from one week to the next. For a wrestler like Bret, who relied not on gimmicks but on his skills in the ring, it was a situation in which he could not thrive.

Even if he wasn't realizing his potential in WCW, Bret was still a massive star. On May 23, 1999, he was flying from Ottawa to Los Angeles, where he was scheduled to appear on *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno. Midflight, he was handed a note from the pilot: Owen had been hurt during his match in Kansas City. Bret felt sick to his stomach but kept his composure. Wrestlers got hurt all the time and Owen was tough. Besides, this was pro wrestling. This was likely some angle that the fans and media bought hook, line, and sinker. Still, he planned to call his parents as soon as the plane touched down.

Arriving in Los Angeles, Bret soon learned the horrible truth. Owen was dead.

Chapter eighteen

The Death of Owen

Owen Hart felt uneasy about the stunt from the moment it was proposed to him. A popular WCW wrestler called Sting had been flying into the ring lately, gliding down from arena rafters attached to a cable and harness. It had become Sting's shtick, and McMahon wanted to mock it with the Blue Blazer, his very own parody of such superhero wrestlers.

Dressed as the Blazer, Owen would similarly fly down from the rafters in Kansas City's Kemper Arena, flapping his arms like a demented chicken, his feathery cape swooshing behind him. There were even plans to send the thirty-four-year-old wrestler on the eight-story vertical drop accompanied by a midget, also dressed in the goofy Blue Blazer regalia. That was scrapped when it was decided it complicated the stunt.[1]

It wasn't that Owen was scared of heights. He was a high flier in the ring who once wanted to be a firefighter. He had flown from the rafters once before, too, about six months earlier in St. Louis, Missouri. But everything about this ridiculous stunt made the youngest Hart boy wary. In St. Louis, his harness had been attached to the nylon cable that lowered him by a locking carabiner, a metal connector often used in mountain climbing. That time, when Owen touched down on the mat, he had had to fumble with the carabiner to detach himself from the cable. McMahon was allegedly not happy. He thought it looked awkward and stalled the all-important action in the ring. He wanted something with a quick release.[2]

Chris Benoit and Owen Hart: young guns in the late 1980s.

The sensational Owen Hart soars high to land hard on the masked Viet Cong Express No. 1 during a tag-team bout in the mid-1980s.

What Vince wants, Vince gets, and so Owen was to be dangled seventy-eight feet above the ring attached to his lifeline by a quick-release snap shackle. Once he was lowered, he would simply tug on the release cord taped to the front of his harness and be freed from the rappelling line to move about the ring and get the show rolling. It took a mere six pounds of pressure to trigger the shackle's release, "roughly equivalent to the pressure required to pull the trigger of a gun," Martha Hart notes.[3] Owen liked the security of the locking carabiner. This quick-release mechanism made him nervous. To make matters worse, he had to wear that asinine Blue Blazer outfit and, the way he was strapped in the harness, hanging above the ring, his heavy cape tugged annoyingly at his neck.

Owen told several of his fellow wrestlers that he wasn't comfortable with the stunt, and he was seen pacing around the dressing room before his scheduled match, but he felt he might as well just get the nightmare over with. In the last year and a half, he had rejected so many ideas for his character on moral grounds. There were only so many schemes one could refuse without running afoul of McMahon.

Owen did not want to jeopardize his job. He needed it now more than ever, having just built the palatial home he and Martha had always dreamed of, on two acres in Calgary's posh Elbow Valley. Martha was packing up for the move that weekend. The couple looked forward to raising their two children, seven-year-old Oje and three-year-old Athena, in that house. They were also talking about having a third child. Martha says Owen wanted to work for a couple more years and make as much money as he could, then quit the business and dedicate himself to the family that meant everything to him. He hated being away from them.

The Blue Blazer's match with wrestler-pimp The Godfather was the third on the card on that Sunday evening, May 23, 1999. During the wrap-up of the second match, Owen was suspended over the ring waiting to make his descent. He could hear the more than sixteen thousand fans roaring beneath him at the mayhem in the ring.

At 7:41 PM, the lights dimmed and a forty-second profile of the Blue Blazer played on the Jumbotron. Owen made what appeared to be an adjustment to his cape. Then the three stunt riggers up in the rafters heard the click of the snap shackle being released. Several fans later said they heard Owen scream as he plunged at forty-five miles per hour toward the mat.[4]

The lights went up just as 229-pound Owen bounced violently off the ring ropes, narrowly missing the steel turnbuckle. The masked man crashed to the canvas and bounced into the corner on his back as the crowd cheered.

Most of the fans thought the violent entrance was part of the show. Others thought a crash test dummy had been dropped into the ring.

The impact shattered Owen's left arm and tore his aorta, the artery leading from his heart. As his lungs filled with blood, Stu and Helen's baby lifted his head a few inches off the mat as though grasping for survival. A moment later, Owen weakly dropped his head, his eyes staring blankly ahead.

Co-announcer Jerry Lawler left his post and ran to the ring, along with two security guards, one of whom began giving Owen chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. "We've got a big problem out here," said co-announcer Jim Ross, pale with fright. "This is a very serious situation," Ross told the audience. "This is not a part of the entertainment here tonight. This is as real as real can be."

Medics arrived and tended to the shattered Hart. He had no pulse and was changing colour rapidly, first turning white, then grey, then purple. His lips were blue. As he was rushed from the arena on a stretcher the crowd chanted "Owen! Owen!" Some fans were crying. One fan shouted, "This is fucking fake."

Owen was rushed to Truman Medical Center, four miles from the arena, where he was pronounced dead. Vince McMahon decreed that the show must go on. Owen's tag team partner Jeff Jarrett came to the ring next with a pained look on his face. His valet Debra was crying. The wrestlers backstage waited for their scheduled bouts in a state of turmoil. But the script was carried on almost to the letter through the rest of the evening, with "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, The Rock, and the rest of the cast doing their thing. One pretaped segment, featuring Vince McMahon supposedly breaking his ankle and being whisked away from Kemper Arena in an ambulance, ran as scheduled.

Owen's name was mentioned only once more, when Jim Ross informed the pay-per-view audience that Owen had died.[5] It was an ugly shot of reality that spoiled the twisted fantasy cooking in the ring. That would not do. After the announcement was made, it was swept aside and the show kept rolling.

After the show, McMahon was cornered by journalists, who grilled him about his "show must go on" decision. Ever the bully, McMahon stared down one reporter, saying, "Lady, I don't like your tone." He issued a statement to the media shortly after, saying, "Our thoughts and prayers are with Owen's family.... The highest tribute that we can pay is to go on entertaining the fans he loved so much."[6]

Martha Hart had felt strangely ill at ease all that day. She couldn't understand

why. It should have been a happy time. The kids were playing outside, and she was getting ready for the family's move to their wonderful, new home. And yet, despair gnawed at her. She was fixing the kids' supper when she got the call from Vince McMahon.

"Owen has fallen from above the ring and he's hurt," McMahon told Martha solemnly.

"Is this is a serious call? Or is this part of your production?" Martha snapped, rattled, thinking she was being made a part of some tasteless angle. Nothing was below the WWF as far as she was concerned. McMahon assured her it was a deadly serious call. Panic rising from the pit of her stomach, Martha began firing questions at the wrestling kingpin about the accident and Owen's condition. Vince had too few answers for her.

"I know how much you and Owen meant to each other," he said ominously, and told Martha that medics worked on Owen before he was taken to the hospital.

"Are those real, qualified paramedics, or are they uncertified quack doctors that you have sit at ringside?" Martha said, panic rising in her voice. Now she was convinced that the accident was real.

"Someone will call you soon," McMahon said meekly, ending the conversation.[7]

Martha made a frantic call to Hart House. Much of Stu's brood was over for the weekly feast. They knew nothing and the panic in Martha's voice shook everybody up. Martha said she would call back when she heard more. Minutes later, Martha's phone rang again. It was a Kansas City doctor. Martha doubled over in tears as he gave her the horrible news. Then, mustering up all her strength, she called Hart House again. Helen answered. The family was filled with dread. Word about the accident was already spreading like wildfire and after Martha's initial call, others had followed. Friends, family members, they all wanted information. They wanted to tell the Harts what they had seen on TV. They wanted to pass on their prayers. But no prayers were going to bring back Owen.

The seventy-five-year-old Hart matriarch pleaded weakly, unable to accept what her daughter-in-law was saying. "No, not Owen, he can't be gone." Then, as if struck by the black reality, Helen dropped the phone and let out an anguished scream. "Owen's dead!"[8] For the first and only time in his life, Bruce saw tears pour from his father's eyes. "They were coming out like sweat," he later said. "But he never said a word."[9]

The next day, both Martha's house and the Hart mansion were besieged by visitors. The calls poured in from friends, fans, and celebrities alike, all

offering their condolences. Alberta premier Ralph Klein, hockey hero Wayne Gretzky, members of the Calgary Stampeders and the Calgary Flames, future heavyweight boxing champion Lennox Lewis, Ed Whalen, stars and wannabes of the wrestling game – they all felt for the Hart family's loss.

Media from around the world descended on Calgary. In the days to come, *Good Morning America*, *Entertainment Tonight*, and *Larry King Live* all wanted a piece of the story. The *National Enquirer* offered Martha's sister Virginia U.S.$10,000 for any inside information she had, an offer she refused.[10]

Stu and Helen had an open door policy. The family that had grown up in the spotlight was willing to grieve publicly. Cameras snapped away as Bret, the star, arrived at the house on his motorcycle, embracing his sisters and his frail mother. Stu sat at the massive dinner table, his eyes now dry as stones but filled with pain, looking at pictures of Owen. Bret's eyes watered as he put his hand on his father's shoulder.

Almost the entire family was cordial to the media, answering any question they posed. At times, Helen seemed to be on autopilot, polite and charming to reporters. But when the questions about Owen came down to the nitty-gritty details, she trembled and teared up. "I used to have nightmares about one of my sons getting crippled from wrestling," she told one reporter. "But not this. I can't believe it.... He was my little baby, so clever and fun. He was the light of our lives."[11]

Stu, eighty-four, was hard to talk to at the best of times. He was hard of hearing and in conversations his mind tended to wander. Even the day after his son's death he went off on rambling tangents about wrestling's glory days. It frustrated reporters, which seemed to amuse family members. But even Stu was succinct about one thing. "I couldn't be more proud of a son," he said in a gruff but vulnerable voice.[12]

At first, Ellie condemned the WWF, though she would soon do an about-face. "Wrestling has gone too far," she said. "In their efforts to beat the WCW, the gimmicks and the dangerous stunts have gotten out of hand. Owen was a sacrifice to the ratings."[13] Bret also lashed out at the state of the wrestling business. "This is the kind of wild spectacle that sells wrestling these days," he said. "Wrestling fans have become like wild dogs and they just clamour for more."[14]

Most of the Hart family slammed the WWF for continuing the show after the accident. Davey Boy Smith, however, who was hoping to get back into the wrestling business, stuck up for McMahon. It was a harbinger of the family's growing division on the issue. "No one knew Owen's condition after it happened," Davey said. "No one knew if it was fatal. You get people saying it was

in bad taste that Vince went on with the show, but if you didn't, you'd have [thousands] of pissed off fans who might riot."[15]

On May 24, in St. Louis, Missouri, McMahon turned Monday night's *Raw Is War*, televised in 120 countries, into a two-hour tribute to Owen. It featured short, tasteful matches with clean pro wrestling exhibitions and no crazy storylines. The grapplers wore black armbands with Owen's name on them. The majority of the show revolved around the traumatized wrestlers speaking about Owen. They talked about his clean lifestyle and devotion to his family. His sense of humour was a popular topic, one grappler recalling the day Owen dumped a bottle of hot sauce into a pot of chili made for the wrestlers. Mark Henry, a tank of a man known as "Sexual Chocolate," read a poem for Owen and sobbed heavily. Jeff Jarrett said that in a "cold, callous, selfish, self-serving and unrealistic business," Owen conducted himself with dignity. Vince McMahon did not speak on the show. Instead, his son, Shane, spoke on behalf of the company. Furious, Martha denounced the show as "a sick way to profit from her husband's death."[16]

McMahon deserves no sympathy in this situation, but to be fair to him, he was in a position where he was going to be crucified for anything he said or did in relation to Owen – condemned if he ignored the incident and condemned if he paid tribute. One can understand Martha's scathing stance. When she took her children to the funeral home, she watched as her scared, confused daughter begged Owen to wake up.[17]

The funeral was held on May 31. It was a grey, drizzly morning. The three hundred seats at the McInnis & Holloway Funeral Home in southwest Calgary were reserved for close friends and family, but about fifteen hundred fans showed up, gathered to pay their respects and hear the service, which was piped outside through speakers. The fans, many of them weeping, brought flowers and held signs that paid tribute to the Hart family and said goodbye to Owen. Some of them had driven all night from as far away as Spokane, Washington, to be there.

Three busloads of WWF wrestlers pulled up to the funeral home and filed into the service as fans flocked toward them, snapping pictures frantically. The Rock, The Undertaker, Gorilla Monsoon, Mick Foley, Hunter Hearst Helmsley and his girlfriend, the Amazonian Chyna – they were all there, along with referees and officials. WWF newcomer Chris Jericho, a rising young star whom the Harts had trained in the Dungeon a decade before, was there too. A few WCW stars showed up as well, including Chris Benoit and Hulk Hogan, who was wearing a black suit and sunglasses, his platinum hair poking out from under a black bandana. And, of course, old Stampede

Wrestlers such as Bad News Allen, Gama Singh, and Dan Kroffat attended.

Vince McMahon was accompanied by his wife and business partner, Linda, his son, Shane, and his daughter, Stephanie. They entered through a side door to escape the media glare.[18] Many criticized McMahon for attending the funeral, but Martha had invited him. In fact, she insisted he come. She wanted him to see Owen in his coffin. She wanted him to see her fatherless children. She wanted him to see the damage his twisted games had caused.[19]

Bret and Ross delivered heartfelt eulogies at the funeral. Bret's speech made the crowd laugh as he recalled his little brother's lifelong sense of humour, recounting how as a little boy Owen entertained his siblings by orchestrating wrestling matches between his stuffed toys and the family's cross-eyed cat, Heathcliff.

Martha's emotional eulogy contained the most important words of the day, and they were clearly directed at McMahon. "There will be a day of reckoning. This is my final promise to Owen," she said in a defiant tone. "I won't let him down."[20] Martha had declared war.

That day, sparks began to fly. At Queen's Park Cemetery in Calgary's northwest, where the funeral procession was led by a police motorcade, Martha ordered the removal of a heart-shaped floral arrangement sent by the WWF that included the company's logo shaped out flowers. "[McMahon] wanted credit for his transparent generosity and compassion," Martha writes. "It wasn't going to happen under my watch."[21]

With his brothers as pallbearers, the youngest Hart was taken to the gravesite, his heavy coffin draped with a Canadian flag. As a bugler played "The Last Soldier," the coffin was lowered into the ground. The dreadful finality of it all sunk in for Keith Hart. "I always thought Owen was the one guy who would escape the business unsoiled, unscathed," he says. "That's the irony.... He was a smart guy, looked after his money, took care of his family, he had all his priorities straight. He was totally immaculate, and this is the guy who dies in the ring. It's like the business [leaves] no survivors."

The wake was held that afternoon at Hart House. Wrestlers mingled with Calgary dignitaries in the backyard. Off in a secluded corner, Bret stood face to face with McMahon, who had asked to meet with him. Bret had already been warned by Martha's lawyers not to discuss the accident with McMahon. Later, McMahon would use this against The Hitman. "He mentioned Owen in one sentence and the rest of it was about Bret," McMahon told TSN. "I couldn't believe what I was hearing – I'd ruined his marriage, I'd ruined his career. All he wanted to talk about was himself.... It was like looking into the eyes of a skeleton.... It seemed like he wasn't human."[22]

Months later, in his *Calgary Sun* column, Bret responded, reiterating that he was not allowed to talk about Owen with McMahon. "As for him to say I was like a skeleton," Bret wrote, "considering my family … [just buried] my younger brother, is that surprising?"[23]

That day, however, the McMahons tried to position themselves as allies of the Harts. "What we have here is one big family," Shane McMahon said. "There will always be a great bond between the Harts and the McMahons." Some of the Hart kids believed it to be so. Diana told a reporter: "Dad is like a father figure to Vince and Vince felt like Owen was one of his sons. It must have been really hard for Vince to see Owen's father in this situation."[24] Martha was disgusted when she saw Ellie and Diana hugging McMahon.

That was nothing, however, compared with the fury she felt later that evening when footage of the wrestlers attending Owen's funeral appeared on *Raw Is War.* Martha claims she had told McMahon the proceedings were not for his show. "I feel exploited and violated," she told a reporter.[25] In response, McMahon wrote a letter to the *Calgary Sun* claiming that Martha had agreed to the filming "so that Owen's fans could say goodbye."[26] The two also got into mudslinging over who paid for what at the funeral. McMahon claimed that he tried to pick up all the costs but Martha wouldn't allow it. He was quick to itemize exactly what he did pay for.

It seemed nasty, but it was only a hint of what was to come. "All we had been doing the last week was sizing one another up," Martha wrote. "Now it was clear the fight was on."[27]

Martha Hart hammered her fist on the podium in a Kansas City hotel room, flanked by Stu, Helen, and Bret. She announced to the media assembled and to the world that she was suing Vince McMahon and twelve others, including the riggers who set up the stunt and Kansas City, which owned Kemper Arena.

"Professional wrestling has become a showy display of graphic violence, sexual themes, and ever more dangerous stunts," she said. "When I found out the WWF continued the show … I was outraged and repulsed. To me, this demonstrates the mindset of the WWF and Vince McMahon."[28]

The 118-page statement of claim asked for "fair and reasonable damages," to be determined by a Kansas City jury. The media speculated that if successful, she would be rewarded as much as U.S.$500 million.[29] The civil suit included allegations of wrongful death due to negligence, equipment failure, and conscious disregard for human safety.

At the suggestion of Martha's lawyers, Stu and Helen were included as

co-plaintiffs in the lawsuit. Martha hesitated at first, fearing that some of the Hart kids would try to interfere in the case, but after a sleepless night she changed her mind. "Owen was always very protective of his parents," she writes, "and if they were entitled to something, I decided they should get it. That's what he would want."[30]

Kansas City police were conducting a criminal investigation into the equipment, its use, and whether Owen was properly trained to be using it. "I was thrilled at the news," Martha writes. "I was encouraged to hear those responsible could face jail time."[31] Ultimately, however, criminal charges were not laid. Still, the investigation conducted by Martha's lawyers uncovered some disturbing allegations.

In past flying stunts, the WWF had used Joe Branam, a Hollywood stunt rigger who had worked for the Rolling Stones, Elton John, and *NSYNC. Martha Hart alleged that Branam had been told McMahon wanted quick-release snap shackles for the WWF flying stunts rather than the locking carabiner. Branam refused to work with the quick-release shackle. Martha writes that he told WWF officials that it was dangerous.[32]

In May 1999, the WWF asked Branam for a quote on a stunt involving Owen. Branam asked for $5,000, which he claimed the WWF found too expensive. Branam knew the industry was rife with riggers who would have no problem using the quick-release shackle and he began to fear for Owen's safety. He asked his right-hand man, Randy Beckman, to contact the WWF and offer to rig the stunt for $3,000. According to Martha Hart, the WWF declined the offer. When Owen's "fly-in" was set up on May 23, 1999, the WWF used an independent rigger, Bobby Talbert.

"There was no doubt in my mind that the reason the WWF didn't use our company and chose an unknown rigger was to save money and to get someone who would use the snap shackle like the WWF wanted," said Beckman in a sworn affidavit.[33]

Martha's legal team claimed that the snap shackle used was manufactured by a British company for the quick release of sailboat masts. Martha's lawyers found a number of experts in the stunt industry who believed that the clip was inadequate for such a stunt. They claimed that the way its release was rigged, with the trip cord on the front of Owen's harness, the broad-chested wrestler could have inadvertently released the shackle merely by making certain movements, including fiddling with his cumbersome cape while hanging above the ring.[34]

In the fall of 1999, the WWF launched a countersuit against Martha, for $75,000 plus the sum of its legal fees, claiming she had breached Owen's

contract. While Martha had launched her suit in Missouri, Owen's WWF contract stated that any legal action taken against the company must be litigated in its home state of Connecticut – where punitive damages are not awarded, thus generally lessening the impact of lawsuits. It was a mean shot. The WWF was playing hardball. What made the countersuit seem even more repulsive to Martha was the WWF's insistence that it was looking out for her best interests. Linda McMahon told CNBC TV, "[the WWF] would love to be able to settle and work through this ordeal with Mrs. Hart … in a way that will take care of her and her children for the rest of their lives."[35] Martha writes in *Broken Harts* that her lawyers had not received a settlement offer.

Bruce, on the other hand, claims that McMahon approached Stu after Owen's funeral and offered the family a U.S.$33 million settlement, "no strings attached." Stu was inclined to accept the offer. He was disgusted by how the accident occurred and devastated by the loss of his son, but he also believed Owen's death was an accident and so long as McMahon accepted responsibility and looked after Martha's family he didn't think it was necessary to the make the wrestling kingpin fry.[36]

Bruce agreed with his father. "From a booking perspective, he must have felt horrible," Bruce says. "I orchestrated a lot of [angles] and I know if I had organized something that went dreadfully wrong, where someone got killed, heaven forbid, I'm sure I'd feel devastated."

Stu was reluctant to join Martha's lawsuit against McMahon, Bruce says, especially as he was asked to sign away all control in the legal proceedings to Martha, even though he was helping pay the huge legal fees. Nevertheless, he wanted to support Owen's family and he stood by Martha.

The battle was on.

Chapter nineteen

Harts Torn Apart

The moment the suit was filed, the family was violently torn in two. On one side was Martha. She wanted much more than money. She wanted accountability. She wanted Vince McMahon found at fault in a court of law, before the eyes of the world. Bret, Keith, and Alison wanted this too. On the other side were Bruce, Ellie, and Diana. They argued that their elderly parents' health was fading and the stress of litigation was destroying them, making their final years hell. If McMahon offered a settlement, the family should take it, they said.

The Martha camp accused them of being selfish, saying they were only worried that Stu and Helen would die before the case was settled. If that happened, the cash-strapped kids might not get any of the money their parents might gain from the lawsuit. Martha and Bret also thought the three were shamelessly sucking up to McMahon. Ellie and Diana had husbands whose careers were on a downward spiral and wanted to be able to work for McMahon. As for Bruce, in the last year, he and Ross had revived Stampede Wrestling. For a short time, the new show was running on the fledgling TV network A-Channel and, for an even shorter time, the promotion returned to the Victoria Pavilion, though it soon found itself holding its cards in dimly lit legion halls. The talent on the new show was for the most part third-rate, and fan interest was dismal. A few of the old names came back for a while,

Nattie Neidhart and her ailing grandfather, Stu. The wrestling legend died on October 16, 2003, shortly after this picture was taken.

including Bad News Allen – who as an announcer was one of the show's few bright lights – but the funds weren't sufficient to pay his salary. Bruce hoped to foster a relationship with the WWF, where Stampede Wrestling would become a farm team for the federation, scouting and training young talent for McMahon. With such a relationship, Bruce hoped he could occasionally have access to some of the WWF's big draws.

Ellie and Diana fired back with accusations of their own, suggesting the lawsuit was driven by Bret's obsession with destroying McMahon because of the infamous Montreal screw-job, when Bret left the WWF at war with his former boss.

Wayne kept his distance from the family, while Ross and Georgia tried to remain neutral. To Martha, however, the situation was black and white: it was either her way or no way, and she was angry with anyone who maintained ties to the siblings she viewed as the terrible trio.[1] As for Smith, according to Martha he approached her lawyers, claiming that he had lost an asset in Owen; presumably he was trying to get in on the legal action. Nobody took him seriously.[2] Owen's widow was becoming increasingly controlling, causing resentment from some of the Hart children, as her lawyers pressured them not to speak to the media about their brother or the case.

Meanwhile, Martha professed to hold no grudges against any wrestlers in the family who depended on McMahon to earn a living, but she sided with Bret in his disdain of Davey Boy Smith when Davey inked a new deal with the WWF in August 1999. Bret lashed out against his brother-in-law in his *Calgary Sun* column. "Saw a strange sight the other day," he wrote. "Dogs rolling in manure and loving every minute of it. For some reason it made me think of how the British Bulldog will do anything to work for the WWF."[3]

According to Diana's book, Bret phoned her in a rage: "Listen you, bitch," he allegedly said, "If I see you, I'll kill you. If I see you walking across the street, I'll run you down with my car. I'm going to tear you and Davey to shreds if I ever see you at mom's house!"[4] For Bret's part, he denounced the book as being filled with "gross distortions."

The real casualties of the family war were Stu and Helen. They supported Martha in the lawsuit, they loved her and their grandchildren, but they also loved Bruce, Ellie, and Diana and refused to take a hard stand against them, even as the trio nagged them to settle with McMahon. Martha's lawyers warned her that if her co-plaintiffs, Stu and Helen, did settle, it might weaken her own claims, thus threatening to derail her lawsuit.

The vicious screaming matches between the kids typically occurred at Hart House, with Stu and Helen caught in the crossfire. Watching their

children rip into each other with such venom, nose to nose and snarling with fangs bared, was beating the Hart parents down physically and spiritually – not just Helen, who was becoming a nervous, teary-eyed shell of her former self but also the invincible Stu, who felt powerless to stop the bad blood. This was not a contrived grudge-match in a wrestling ring. The promoter couldn't snap his fingers and make it stop. This was pure, ugly hatred, eating away at his family like a cancer, and it was all because of his other great love, wrestling.

"You know what, Ellie? Owen thought you were a loser," Bret would seethe, according to Diana.[5] Ellie fired back, tears streaming down her face, accusing Bret of being a self-obsessed egomaniac, gunning for McMahon not for Owen's sake but for revenge.

In an attempt to end the dissension that threatened her case, Martha's lawyers put together an allocation agreement to be signed by all ten of the Hart siblings. This promised to preserve any share Stu and Helen would be entitled to if they died before the case was resolved, provided the children didn't help McMahon's lawyers or try to derail Martha's case. Seven of the ten children signed it. Bret signed to show his support but said he didn't want any of the money. Nor did he need it, unlike his siblings.

Bruce, Ellie, and Diana refused to sign. Perhaps, as Martha suggests, they saw greater benefits for themselves by continuing to side with McMahon.[6] Perhaps they were truly opposed to a long-drawn-out lawsuit that was taking its toll on their parents, despite the promise of cash dangled in front of them like a carrot.

Either way, the lawyers' plan backfired when, unbeknownst to her parents, Ellie made a copy of the allocation agreement and faxed it the WWF's lead counsel, Jerry McDevitt. Ellie later explained her actions to the *Calgary Herald*, saying her elderly parents were devastated by the ongoing lawsuit and Ellie wanted them to pursue a settlement with McMahon rather than have the case drag out in the courts. According to Ellie, the WWF lawyers told her they were trying to reach a settlement, something her parents were not told. "My dad's eighty-five years old and he needed to get on with his life," said Ellie. "All I ever wanted was for him to have peace of mind."[7]

Possession of the allocation agreement gave the WWF much needed ammunition, McMahon's lawyers contending that the document was designed to buy favourable testimony from the Hart children.[8] It amounted to witness tampering, the lawyers claimed. Again, the trial was held up as WWF lawyers began cross-examining select Harts, including Keith, Georgia, and Helen.

Three generations of the Hart family, in the Hart House living room, 1997. Two years later, Owen would die in a WWF wrestling ring and the clan would be torn apart.

In her deposition, Georgia said she did not condemn the WWF. Her oldest son, the brash Teddy Hart, then twenty, had been trying out for the organization, and Georgia stated she had no concerns with him being employed by McMahon. Martha later took a jab at Georgia for this, writing: "Being a mother myself, I was alarmed by such a stand. I wouldn't want my son working for a company that obviously had little regard for the safety of their employees."[9]

When Helen was cross-examined, her comments provided a clue as to Ellie's motives. "I believe that Ellie is suffering from serious domestic, personal and financial problems, which are adversely affecting her judgement," Helen said, adding that her daughter was trying to get Jim Neidhart work in the WWF.[10]

Ellie's life with The Anvil had been a nightmare. In Jim Neidhart's 1980s heyday, the family moved to Florida, but they returned to Calgary in 1995 because of their financial problems, moving into a home purchased by Stu. Jim and Ellie were to make the monthly mortgage payments. Ellie alleges in court documents that by the end of the 1990s, even though Jim was, she claims, earning about $30,000 a month as a wrestler, he stopped making payments on the house.[11]

In a series of sworn affidavits, Ellie alleges Neidhart was a chronic alcohol and drug abuser. She also claims she suffered years of physical abuse, such as a time in January 1999 when she says Jim threw her up a flight of stairs.[12] Ellie's allegations were never proven in court. Her children, Ellie states, were terrified of their father. Even Stu, who opposed divorce, supported Ellie in a letter he wrote to Jim on March 10, 1999, found amid court documents. The Neidharts' living arrangements at the time were confusing, with Jim living at the house sporadically, but Stu clearly had his daughter's protection in mind when he wrote: "I am advised by my daughter … that you and she have now separated and have not been living together. I am aware … that my daughter is fearful that you will cause her major physical harm if you continue to live together.… Because of this, I must ask that you leave the home which I purchased."[13] Although Ellie initiated divorce proceedings on many occasions, she never followed through with them – something that frustrates family members to this day.

Already feeling betrayed by the family dissension, Martha felt she was crossed yet again when Bruce and Ross planned a Stampede Wrestling tribute to Owen one year after his death. Martha was furious when told the brothers were planning on bringing in WWF wrestlers for the show. Bruce defended the idea, saying the event was a way of honouring his brother and that

the WWF wrestlers were attending out of respect for Owen. Nevertheless, the show was cancelled in the wake of Martha's protests.

Martha once more expressed outrage when she learned that the WWF had planned a show at the Saddledome on May 27, close to the anniversary of Owen's death. But her protests were not enough to stop that event. As much as she would have loved to stop it, the WWF juggernaut would not stop rolling for her or anybody.

"When I lost my trial date, I almost lost my mind," writes Martha in her book, *Broken Harts*.[14] At the rate the lawsuit was going, it looked as though the legal wrangling could go on for years, and after the fiasco with the allocation agreement, Owen's widow feared she stood to lose everything. She finally agreed to settle. Stu was barred from the negotiation sessions. He had forgiven McMahon for what he saw as a mistake and the lawyers were afraid the old man would shake McMahon's hand in the boardroom, weakening their stance as they tried to play hardball in ironing out a deal.

It was another example of the ill-treatment Helen felt she and Stu had been subjected to by the legal team. She felt they were kept in the dark and patronized by the attorneys, who, in her opinion, were too free with the Harts' cash. They worked for Martha and didn't care how Stu and Helen felt about anything, it seemed.

When one of the meetings opened with Martha's now all too familiar rant against the WWF, Helen was filled with despair. She wondered if the nightmare would ever end. She told Stu's biographer Marsha Erb that McMahon's speech that day in the meeting was a great relief to her. As Helen recalled it, McMahon came clean and said he wanted to "do right by [Owen's] family." McMahon added: "I know that nothing can ever bring him back."[15]

When the meeting ended, Martha says, Helen tried to talk to McMahon at Bruce's behest. She was going to approach the wrestling kingpin for a job for her wrestling-obsessed son. Martha nipped that idea in the bud.[16]

The case was settled for U.S.$18 million in November 2000. Martha would receive $10 million, minus legal fees. Her children would receive $3 million each, while Stu and Helen would receive $1 million each, minus their share of the bills. Shockingly, once the attorneys were paid and the taxman took his piece of the pie, the parents came away with less than $700,000 each.

The deal done, Martha began speaking to the media. Her message had a mean-spirited edge. Bitter about her experience with the Harts during the lawsuit, she lashed out at them in public. Her words were unnecessary and unkind, not in keeping with the saintly image Martha tried to project.

"These people worked against me," she told the *Calgary Herald.* "I am removing myself and my children from the family. I carry the last name, but I'm not related to them anymore."[17] In the *Calgary Sun,* she stated that "people need to know that Owen was a white sheep in a black family."[18]

The words were an unjust slap in the face to the Harts who had stood by her – Bret, Keith, Alison, and, most importantly, Stu and Helen. The parents unquestionably failed to stand by Martha as firmly as she would have liked, torn as they were by their love for all their children, but they did not back out, despite pressure from some of their kids and their own doubts. They saw the ordeal with Martha through to the end.

Martha's hostility toward Bruce, Diana, and Ellie is understandable. She believed she was seeking justice for Owen and felt they betrayed her. But Martha did not have to make a point of smearing Owen's siblings in public; she might have been more understanding. Bruce, Ellie, and Diana were not wealthy as Bret was, and, as distasteful as Martha found it, they needed McMahon to get ahead in the wrestling business. And, although Martha worked at a women's shelter, she never seemed to acknowledge that Ellie's behaviour may have been the act of a desperate woman in need of help, given Ellie's allegations about her abusive marriage.

Part of the reason for Martha being so forthcoming with the media was that she was announcing her plans to start the Owen Hart Foundation, a charity to aid the working poor. She also funded an addition to Calgary's Rockyview General Hospital and established an Owen Hart Memorial fund at the Alberta Children's Hospital. This was the way she planned to put Vince McMahon's "dirty money" (as she viewed it) to good use. But, when she told the *Calgary Sun,* "I plan on doing a lot of good in this city and I want my name distinguished from that family,"[19] she was being unfair. Stu had raised thousands upon thousands of dollars for countless charities for decades.

As a reporter for the *Calgary Herald,* I spoke to Martha the day she announced her settlement to the media. I sought to balance the story by contacting one of the so-called "black" Harts. I wound up speaking to Ellie, who was crushed by what Martha had to say. She screamed defensively into the phone, wrenching sobs punctuating her words: "I asked my parents, 'Have you talked with Vince McMahon at all? Did you know they tried to settle?' They had no idea.... I had no idea Martha was going to sit there and bury us. There's no closure in our lives. It's a damn mess and I'm sick of our family being portrayed as these horrible bastards."[20]

That night, after the newspaper had gone to press, I received a call from Helen. She sounded shaken. Ellie had phoned her, hysterical, and Helen

was worried sick about the way the family would be portrayed in the *Herald*. She was afraid the Harts would come off as embarrassingly dysfunctional yet again. She begged me not to run such a story. I tried to assure her that I spoke to Ellie simply to hear her side of the story, but I don't think Helen was convinced. There was an unmistakable helplessness in her voice. Helen Hart sounded utterly defeated.

On May 28, 2001, the WWF returned to Calgary's Saddledome for a televised Raw Is War card. McMahon invited Stu and Helen to attend the event and they accepted. When Martha heard about this, she publicly stated that any Hart who attended the show was disrespecting Owen's memory. Bret felt the same way and promised Martha his parents would not be attending. The day of the show, Bruce and Ellie took their father from the house before Bret arrived to intervene. Helen opted to stay behind to do her hair for the evening ahead. When Bret arrived at Hart House, he persuaded his mother not to attend the event.[21]

As the show was broadcast across the world that evening, the announcer told the capacity crowd of eighteen thousand that members of the first family of wrestling were in attendance. Stu, looking gaunt and sickly from the pneumonia and heart problems he had been battling in recent months, was helped to his feet by Bruce, who raised his father's hand proudly. Diana, Smith, Bruce, Ellie, and many of the grandkids stood by Stu as the adoring crowd chanted his name for close to ten minutes. With a sly grin on his face, Smith held up a sign for the cameras to zoom in on. It said, tauntingly, "Hi, Bret."[22]

Later in the evening, Dungeon graduates Chris Benoit and Chris Jericho offered a tribute. "Both of us owe a lot to one man, the father of the greatest wrestling family of all time," bellowed the charismatic Jericho. "I'm talking about Stu Hart!" The crowd went wild. "I'm not going to forget another member of the Hart family, our good friend, Owen Hart!" The camera zoomed in on Stu, looking bewildered, as if he didn't know where he was. At Jericho's speech, he lifted his hand skyward again, his eyes, so empty of late, lighting up proudly.

That evening, Martha phoned Hart House. "I am ashamed of all of you and you should be ashamed of yourselves! Go to hell!" she screamed at Helen before slamming down the phone.[23]

Martha was behaving like a tyrant. When she opposed the Harts' being friendly with the WWF during the lawsuit, she had a valid point. Now she was merely being a bully. Were the Harts not allowed to make their own

decisions and form their own opinions when it came to McMahon? She herself writes that she came to believe McMahon was sorry for the accident. She also says he sent a cheque for more than $50,000 as a donation to the Alberta Children's Hospital in Owen's name.[24] Years later, Bret would also make his peace with McMahon.

Three days after Stu's WWF appearance, the Hart patriarch was flown to Ottawa's Rideau Hall. There, Governor General Adrienne Clarkson presented him – along with such highbrow luminaries as June Callwood and Mordecai Richler – with the prestigious Order of Canada. Accompanied by Helen, Stu was recognized not only for his work as a wrestling promoter but also for his commitment to the Calgary community and his support of more than thirty charities.

That was one of few bright lights in a dark year. Diana Hart released her tell-all autobiography, *Under the Mat*, in the fall of 2001. In it she cast most of her family in the worst possible light, portraying her mother as a weak, ineffectual alcoholic and Bret as an egomaniacal bully. She also dished dirt on Bruce, Smith, Ellie, Ed Whalen, and countless wrestlers. Some of her most scathing commentary was reserved for Martha and for her own husband, Davey Boy, with whom she was embroiled in vicious divorce proceedings.

Davey Boy's WWF comeback had been marred by his continued drug addiction, Diana writes. He was still using steroids, abusing painkillers, and shooting morphine, all of which reduced his work in the ring to a lethargic, pathetic shadow of the mighty British Bulldog he had once been. Finally, McMahon let him go.

After Diana filed for divorce, Davey Boy got back at her by having an affair with her long-time rival, Andrea Hart, wife of Bruce. This scandal became public when Davey was arrested for allegedly threatening to kill Diana and Ellie, charges that were ultimately dismissed. Throughout his trial for uttering threats, Davey came to the courthouse accompanied by Bruce's wife, the mother of five children. Andrea was beaming on the arm of her new man. Three days after the Bulldog was found innocent, he was again in trouble with the law, this time for uttering death threats to Bruce. Almost eleven months later, the Crown again dismissed the charges against the wrestler.

When Bruce's wife left him for his brother-in-law Davey Boy, it was a fiasco that made the Hart family look like white trash. This eccentric, talented brood who had once been the toast of Calgary now appeared fit for the *Jerry Springer Show* – exactly what Martha accuses them of.[25]

Many of the Harts remained close to Davey Boy throughout the ordeal, but Andrea became a pariah to most of the family. Bruce had been a devoted hus-

band and a dedicated father, says his niece Nattie Neidhart. He was faithful to his wife and never abused drugs or alcohol. He doted on their son, Rhett, then nine years old, who was born with cerebral palsy. "I think Andrea always wanted Bruce to be more in wrestling and she had this little crush on Davey, because he was a big wrestling star," says Nattie. "When Davey started to sink, she moved in there.... [Davey] was in a very vulnerable position."

Embittered by the situation with Davey Boy, Diana wrote a book that is highly litigious. Poorly written, full of factual errors, and oozing with bile toward a number of people, one reviewer said the world according to Diana Hart made "*Mommy Dearest* look like a Hallmark Mother's Day card."[26] The book is compelling in a morbid way – reading it is akin to gawking at the gory aftermath of a car crash. Putting aside the skewed facts and low blows, it is the truth as an emotionally hurting Diana Hart sees it, and not a complete work of fiction as its detractors suggest.

Soon after the book's release, Martha issued a statement denouncing it as "distortions, misstatements and unjustified slurs" that threatened to destroy her reputation and "undermine the memory of Owen." When she threatened to sue the publisher, distributor, and authors, the book was pulled from the shelves. Diana fired back in the *National Post*, calling Martha a rich bully. "Martha has money to fight me on it and I don't," she said. "I know what I've written is true."[27]

Martha released her own book, *Broken Harts: The Life and Death of Owen Hart*, in September 2002. She had told the press that, unlike Diana's autobiography, her book would not be cruel.

Her book is well researched. It is full of love for Owen and infinitely classier than Diana's book. But the bitter jabs are there. While *Under the Mat* was all about down-and-dirty trash talk, prim and proper Martha took her digs while looking down her nose at the Hart clan. Much of the book had a shrill, sanctimonious tone to it as she attacks not only the wrestling business but also the family that was so ingrained in the sport.

Martha's outrage at the Harts who stood against her is understandable. But her sweeping condemnation of the family and everything they stand for is unfair. She's even hard on Stu and Helen. Many of the Hart children, including Bret, were put off the book for that reason. One comes away from *Broken Harts* with the distinct impression that Martha wants to deny the part of her husband that was a Hart and a wrestler. She sees shame in the wrestling business and seeks to bring a dignity to Owen's life that she feels he lost as a wrestler and part of a wrestling clan. She can't come to grips with this side of her husband's life. But this was a very real part of who Owen was. It's

sad, because her prevailing love for Owen is unconditional. *Broken Harts* is a tale of a woman in pain.

Helen would have agonized over the Martha-Diana book war had she lived to see it play out, and been deeply hurt by what both women wrote. As it was, she had been tortured enough spending a lifetime in the wrestling business she often hated. But the family she loved so dearly always made those hardships worthwhile. When that family was destroyed by the business, it was more than she could bear.

On September 26, 2001, seventy-seven-year-old Helen returned from visiting her sister in California. With the intense security at the airport in the days following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Helen was held up for hours. During the commotion, the long-suffering diabetic's blood sugar levels went awry. When she finally arrived home, she went straight to bed. The next morning, when Stu couldn't wake her, she was rushed to a hospital, where she had diabetic seizures and fell into a coma.

Stu sat by her side day and night, family and friends filing in and out, everyone praying that she would rally. A week later, Helen did come out of her coma. Filled with hope, Stu read her poetry the two had enjoyed when he courted her all those years ago.

On November 4, when it was all too clear Helen was slipping away, Stu said to his Tiger Belle, "If you could smile for me one more time, it would mean everything to me." Helen laid her eyes on the love of her life and granted him his wish, smiling weakly.[28] Stu held her head up and kissed her on the face to say goodbye.

Alison remembers the family gathering at Hart House for Sunday dinner after her mother died. Stu sat down at the head of the table and cried in front of the family. He couldn't stop. Alison panicked and phoned Bret. "Dad's crying," she said, "and I can't stop it."

"Let him cry," Bret said. "He needs to let it out."

Alison realized her brother was right, but the sight of her mighty father reduced to tears shook her to the core. "He was so strong, and I needed him to be strong still," she says.

Helen's funeral was a dignified affair, with burly wrestlers on their best behaviour seated next to Helen's posh sisters and women from her jazzercise class. Bret, Bruce, Alberta premier Ralph Klein, and Ed Whalen paid touching tributes, but it was Stu's speech that made the biggest impact. With a clarity that was rare for him in his later years, Stu reminisced about the beauty he met on the New York beach over fifty years ago. Ever positive, he tried to

focus on the good in their relationship. "I'm glad I had this much time with her," he said.[29] But his profound pain was evident. "I'll never get over this," he said solemnly. "I don't have enough time."[30]

Helen was Stu's princess among the pirates of Stampede Wrestling. Now she was gone, and he didn't know how to live without her. The superman of the Prairies was suddenly a mere mortal, dying of a broken heart.

The tragedies continued in the months to come, fate hammering the spiritually battered Hart family with cruel relentlessness.

After he spoke at Helen's funeral, Ed Whalen went on a vacation with his wife, Nomi, to Florida, where the seventy-four-year-old sportscaster had a heart attack. After three days in a coma, the voice of Stampede Wrestling was silenced on December 4, 2001. It was fitting that Ed and Helen would die in such close proximity to one another. "My mother and Ed Whalen were really the only class elements of the business," said Ross Hart. "They both added so much dignity to our company."

Among the many tributes to Whalen was a three-minute montage played on the Jumbotron at the Saddledome before a Calgary Flames game. On the Global News website, nearly sixteen thousand messages were posted from around the world by people who wanted to share their favourite Whalen memories.

On May 18, 2002, the Harts suffered another devastating loss when Davey Boy Smith died of a heart attack, at the age of thirty-nine, while vacationing at the Fairmont Hot Springs resort in British Columbia with his girlfriend, Bruce's estranged wife, Andrea. Andrea told the *Calgary Herald* that the couple went to bed in each other's arms on Friday night and when she awoke on Saturday, the British Bulldog was dead. The coroner's report said Davey died of natural causes but made a point of stating he had used anabolic steroids in the past. A bottle of trenbolone acetate, a steroid extracted from cattle, was found in Davey and Andrea's hotel room.

Davey had again been attempting to relaunch his career, wrestling his last match on May 11 at an indie show held in a Winnipeg community centre. His tag team partner for the bout was his sixteen-year-old son, Harry. Harry says his father was full of pride that he got to wrestle side by side with his son: "It was a dream come true for both us." Other people close to Davey say, too, that he seemed happy in his final days. Andrea claims the two were discussing marriage (even though, according to Nattie Neidhart, Davey was at Diana's house three days before he died trying to reconcile with her).

Again, stars in the wrestling world – including Hulk Hogan, Vince McMahon, and Chris Benoit – came from around the world to pay their respects to

a fallen comrade. Two funeral services were held for Davey, one organized by Andrea, the other by the Hart family.

Nattie Neidhart says that despite his problems, Davey had a warm and kind heart. "He was always there for us," she says. "When there were big fights between my mom and dad, he would help us out financially [and] give us a place to stay."

At the Hart family service, Bret delivered a moving eulogy in which he referred to the Hart family's last few years as "a long, exhausting argument with God."[31] Bret's frustration would become even more poignant less than a month later when he suffered a stroke while riding his bike along Calgary's Bow River, on June 25, 2002.

Bret's career had ended prematurely in December 1999 while wrestling the monstrous Bill Goldberg, a former football player who was fast becoming the biggest star in WCW. But Goldberg's skills in the ring weren't as impressive as his massive 285-pound frame and he accidentally kicked Bret in the head during a match. Soon after, Bret called it quits at the insistence of his doctor. The official announcement of his retirement was made in October 2000.

Even though Bret claimed he suffered his stroke as a result of a bike crash after hitting a pothole on the path, many speculated that his crash occurred because of the stroke, the aftermath of his head injuries from the infamous Goldberg bout. When Bret was unable to get up and back on his bike after the accident, he phoned his wife, Julie, on his cellphone. When she arrived, she was frightened by what she saw. "The pupil in my left eye was the size of a bowling ball and I was drooling," Bret told a reporter. "I had pain right up my left side. And my back felt like someone had slugged me and left his fist in me. I tried to walk and I just fell over."[32]

Bret spent a month in the hospital almost completely paralyzed, crying as he contemplated his fate. The man who was once an icon of strength now had to struggle to merely lift a finger. What had he done, what had his family done, to have been so cursed these last few years, he wondered, his thoughts thrashing angrily as he lay trapped in the prison his body had become. But Bret had always been a fighter and he was determined to battle his way out of this one. It was the toughest challenge he ever faced. Once able to lift a 300-pound wrestler, it now took every ounce of effort to stir a cup of tea. It was a long road to recovery but, one day at a time, he would make it.

His greatest triumph in the hospital came the day Stu arrived for a visit. Being able to walk a few metres to embrace his sad, ailing father brought tears to The Hitman's eyes.

Stu Hart died on October 16, 2003, at the age of eighty-eight. His health had been on the wane for the last decade, taking a serious turn for the worse after Helen died. His knees were ruined and he increasingly relied on a wheelchair to get around. He had bladder and prostate problems, arthritis, and diabetes, and he was showing early signs of Alzheimer disease. He was often confused and disoriented. His old wrestling buddies Phil "Killer" Klein and Les Thornton tell of visiting him and having conversations where Stu reminisced about the good old days with almost photographic recall. Invariably, Stu would be distracted or called away; when he returned a moment later, he had no memory of the conversation he had just had. He acted as though he were meeting his old chums for the first time that day.

But even when he could barely walk, Stu's grip was still vice-like, and he loved nothing more than locking men in his submission holds. Bob Lueck, the former Calgary Stampeder who wrestled for Stu in the early 1970s, visited the wrestling godfather a year before his death. Stu was joking around and grabbed Lueck's neck from behind as if he were going to slap a headlock on him.

"'Ahh, shit, don't do this, Stu,'" Lueck remembers saying. "Even at his age, he still had that spunk, that fire. That sucker was an animal."

Stu's granddaughters, Jenny and Nattie Neidhart, lived in the Hart's coach house and looked after him, keeping him company and giving him his insulin shots. At the beginning of October, they noticed that their grandfather's elbow, which he had cut in a fall days earlier, looked infected. Stu was taken to the hospital, where he was kept for a staph infection. During his stay there he developed pneumonia. Doctors told the family he would never be able to return to Hart House: he required round-the-clock care in a nursing home.

A week later, Stu's condition worsened and the family was warned he didn't have long to live. He fell in and out of consciousness as friends and family gathered around him in his hospital room. Frank Sisson tried to sneak his old pal deep-fried chicken fingers he had brought from his casino – Stu had always loved them. Dan Kroffat, who considered Stu his role model in life, came by and told the old man exactly how he felt about him. Sometimes Stu knew where he was and responded to people. Other times he wasn't as lucid and would call out for his Tiger Belle – something he had been doing during moments of confusion ever since she had died.

Stu died in his sleep with Bret, Bret's by then ex-wife Julie, and granddaughter Jenny Neidhart at his side. It was time. Everybody agreed he had

been dying slowly since Helen's death. "I think he really anticipated being with my mom again," said Diana hours after her father died. "She was probably reaching out. That's what we really all like to think, my mom's calling for him."[33]

Stu's funeral was held on October 23 at the First Alliance Church in southwest Calgary. Over a thousand mourners came to pay their respects to the wrestling icon, including a huge cast of wrestlers, among them Harley Race and Chris Benoit, and a sombre Vince McMahon. The Hart clan filled half a dozen pews at the front of the church as Frank Sinatra's "My Way" and Johnny Cash's "We'll Meet Again" played. Despite the bitter and lasting divisions in the family, on that day the Hart children held hands and rested their heads on one another's shoulders. At one point, Bruce and Bret, the leaders of the warring factions, embraced in the aisle. Ross rose and extended his arm to his brothers.

Those delivering eulogies spoke of Stu's down-to-earth nature, his love for animals, his charitable heart, and his lifelong compassion for the downtrodden. Laughter accompanied tears as many recalled the bizarre and funny aspects of Stu's life. Ralph Klein recalled his days as mayor of Calgary, when Stu would storm into his office and gripe for hours about his troubles with the boxing and wrestling commission. Klein joked that he always listened patiently, lest he wind up in the Dungeon.

Stu, Klein went on to say, "embodied the best of the Alberta spirit" with his "drive, energy and ambition." Bret honoured his father as "a real man, a great man.... [who] touched people right here in Calgary and all around the world."[34]

Nattie cared for her grandfather every day near the end of his life and was crushed by his death but, always positive, she puts things into perspective: "In a way, it was kind of a relief. After my grandmother died, he was never really the same. He lost his reason to live. He had this big family but nobody could get in his bed at night and be my grandmother. That was a huge void for him. It's actually very touching that he never got over her."

For all its madness and mayhem, there's also a tragic beauty to the Stampede Wrestling story, one rooted in Stu Hart and his two great loves. "It's sort of an epic," says Keith. "In the centre of it all, you've got this remarkable romance between my mom and dad. They worshipped each other. My mom was critical of my dad, but to her, there was nothing he couldn't do. He was the ultimate man for her." But Stu's other great love was wrestling, and he could never let it go, even as it destroyed his wife.

John Helton, a former Calgary Stampeder who wrestled for a short time,

went to visit Stu during his final days. "Even in those last days of his life when he was sleeping, I know he was dreaming of wrestling," Helton says. "If ever a person can have a passion in life and live it the whole way through … well, Stu's the only man I've known to live like that. He had a passion you could see in his eyes.… His wife meant the world to him.… but there was nothing he wouldn't do to keep his finger in the wrestling."

Chapter twenty

Harts Go On

Stampede Wrestling lives. Barely. Some fifty years after Stu set up shop in Calgary, the city's wrestling fans can still take in the action nearly every Friday night. The scene today, however, is a lame-duck imitation of those wild evenings Papa Hart orchestrated in the Victoria Pavilion so long ago.

The blame for that does not fall solely on the wrestlers. True, there are many third-rate talents in the promotion: grapplers with soft bellies, zero muscle tone, and minimal charisma who put on awkward, unconvincing matches. There are a number of skinny kids in that ring, too. Not lean and awesomely impressive, like a young Dynamite Kid, but scrawny, with no hope it would seem of getting anywhere in the wrestling game. In today's world, where chiselled muscleheads, flying daredevils, and glitzy larger than life characters dominate the biz, this lot seems all the more forlorn.

But Bruce and Ross have also recruited their share of highly promising talents. Not surprisingly, a few Hart spawn are among them. Harry "Bulldog" Smith, the son of Davey Boy, is a budding young powerhouse in the tradition of his father. The kid, who wrestled his first pro match at age eleven, has been a giant since his teens. Now, at the age of nineteen, the growth spurt continues. Standing six-foot-five and weighing in at 250 pounds, Prince Harry, as the family calls him, has toured with New Japan of late and wrestled a few under-card matches for WWE.*

*WWF changed its name to WWE, for World Wrestling Entertainment, after losing a nine-year court battle with the World Wildlife Fund, which laid claim to the abbreviation WWF.

"Stampede Kid" T.J. Wilson, a standout of the new Stampede Wrestling roster, delivers a flying dropkick.

Teddy Hart, twenty-five, the son of Georgia and B.J. Annis, may just be one of the most fearless and agile fliers in the business, pulling off insane aerial assaults with names like the twisting moonsault, straightjacket jumping piledriver, and horizontal 360 corkscrew, which he refers to as "Open Hart Surgery." Teddy, who is small boned but muscular, thrives in the spotlight. He has a flamboyant streak both in and out of the ring. He was once seen strutting through a Calgary shopping mall with his black hair braided, wearing sunglasses and a pair of obnoxious, furry white pants that looked as if they came straight off a yak's back.

Teddy is his own worst enemy. Arrogant and hotheaded, he had a developmental contract with the WWF at the ripe age of eighteen but was released from the training camp because of "attitude problems."[1] Similar complaints have been heard as Teddy worked with independent wrestling promotions, including Ring of Honor, based in Philadelphia, and his family's own Stampede Wrestling. One Friday night in Calgary, Teddy got on the mike at a Stampede Wrestling match and, indifferent to the children in the audience, tore into a fellow wrestler with a string of profanity. "My favourite nephew," Ross said, sarcastically.

"Teddy Hart's got all the talent in the world and he could go somewhere, but he's got to get his head together," says wrestling journalist Dave Meltzer, citing Teddy's reputation as "a loose cannon."

Nattie Neidhart, twenty-three, is the daughter of Jim "The Anvil" and Ellie. Even though her home life was tumultuous – her father often spiralling out of control on the excesses of the wrestling biz – Nattie is a sweet soul: courteous, warm, and friendly. She's proud of her Hart heritage and struggles to stay neutral in a family so harshly divided. She dearly loves both her uncle Bret and her mother, who can't be in the same room together. Still, Nattie retains a positive outlook.

Nattie in the ring, however, is another story. There, she's an ornery wildcat, not unlike her dad, constantly fuming, outraged by the antics of her enemies, whom she's itching to tear apart. She can do it, too. Neidhart, who used to model in her teens, is cute with long, bleach-blond hair and an attractive smile. But she's nothing like the fake-boobed bikini models WWE tries to pass off as women wrestlers today. While she was waif-like in her modelling days, today Nattie is a squat ball of strength who, like The Anvil, is able to pick up male wrestlers weighing well over 200 pounds and slam them to the mat with as much force as the guys. In 2005, she toured Japan, taking on butch broads who had more in common with the woolly Cuban Assassin than any WWE diva.

Her boyfriend, the high-flying "Stampede Kid" T.J. Wilson, is another fine talent. So is the brutal, six-foot-eight Portuguese giant Karnage. Ravenous Randy Myers, billed as the nephew of '80s bruiser Duke Myers, supposedly hailing from Kalamazoo, Michigan (he's actually Calgary boy Theo Francon), is another one to watch. Inspired by punk rockers Rancid and the bizarre, confrontational comedy of Tom Green and Andy Kaufman, Randy brings a punk sensibility to his ring work. Complete with a bellowing persona, goofy dance moves, and hair that juts up in long spikes, Myers never fails to entertain the crowd.

The problem is there's never much of a crowd. The new Stampede Wrestling is held at the Ogden Legion Hall, or the Ogden Legion of Doom, as it's dubbed, in southeast Calgary. Bruce says the shows draw anywhere from fifty to five hundred fans. On the nights I attended there were never more than a hundred. On one particularly lousy night, it looked closer to twenty-five.

Many of the city's wrestling fans are not even aware that Stampede Wrestling has been revived. Aside from the odd flyer posted in gyms and dive bars around town, Bruce does little to promote the matches. Some of his wrestlers complain he's not willing to spend money on advertising and, consequently, they're faced with dead houses most nights. Bruce, on the other hand, blames the local media for not supporting the Calgary institution he keeps on life-support, but he seems unwilling to do the simplest things to help it. I told him I would include Stampede Wrestling in the weekly entertainment listings of the *Calgary Herald* if he e-mailed the details once a week. He agreed to do so, but the e-mails never came.

When I wrote an article in the *Calgary Herald* magazine *Swerve*, honouring the great villains of Stampede Wrestling past (including a plug for the present-day promotion), Bruce was annoyed: Why was I not focusing on the current product? But a truthful story about today's Stampede Wrestling would not be the promotional rocket boost Bruce clearly feels he's owed as the son of Stu.

The scene at the Ogden Legion is touching in a way, as members of the Hart family struggle to keep the family tradition alive. There's also much to be said for the young wannabe grapplers, killing themselves for pay that is beyond lousy (most of them are lucky if they earn fifteen bucks a night) in front of dismal crowds. But for the most part, the picture is a pathetic one, considering what Stampede Wrestling used to be.

Of the small group of regular attendees at the matches, many of them are family and friends of the wrestlers. Ellie is there most nights to cheer on Nattie. Alison's daughters, Lindsay, twenty, and Brooke, nineteen, who are

dating Randy Myers and "Pistol" Pete Wilson respectively, also never miss a card. They sit with Randy's mother, a gruff art therapist who's consistently in the front row watching her charismatic son play the clown.

A few fathers regularly bring their kids, and a handful of crusty old-timers make it out most evenings. There's also the odd sloppy drunk in the crowd. One night, I spotted a fellow who could barely walk. He was tossed out the door by an overzealous meathead of a security guard, a scuffle that stole the thunder from the action in the ring.

For some reason, a large portion of the audience is made up of mentally challenged children. They are in their glory, jeering and cheering and chasing after the wrestlers in between matches, hoping to talk to them and get their autographs. A couple of them seem to have a crush on Nattie and, whenever she can, she tries to make time for them. One night, one of the boys in a wheelchair asked her for a hug. She gave him one and the kid lit up like he had just made it to heaven.

As the matches unfold, Bruce is in and out of the dressing room, often standing at the sidelines. He watches the action intently like a kooky movie director. Some of the wrestlers express frustration at his storylines, at the twists and turns he concocts. There's a poor sense of continuity from one week to the next, they complain. Too often, things don't make sense, like the night Nattie was felled by a low blow, which would not be as devastating to a woman wrestler as to a man. An inferior sound system in the legion hall also makes the stories tough to follow. When the wrestlers get on the microphone to make their boasts and threats – crucial business in moving the angles forward – it sounds like a muddled mess.

But occasionally, there's a glimmer of the twisted genius that fired the Stampede Wrestling of old. For several months, Randy Myers was teamed up with seventeen-year-old Dan Vander-Griendt, who wrestles as Dandy Myers. They came to the ring with a hefty redhead called Ma Myers, their shtick similar to that of TV's popular *Trailer Park Boys*.

Meanwhile, the villainous Karachi Vice is back with Gama Singh's son, Raj, trying to break into the wrestling business as Gama Singh Jr. He's accompanied by a friend who wrestles as "Tiger" Raj Singh Jr. Often Gama Sr. joins the boys at ringside as their manager. For a time, a large group of kids from Gama's neighbourhood, the predominantly East Indian Terra Vista, came to the matches to cheer on the Vice. "Gama! Gama!" they chanted, a sharp contrast to the days of "Go home, Paki!" The Vice were meant to be heels, but there was such overwhelming enthusiasm from the ethnic crowd that the kids began cheering for them too, jeering the cocky Teddy Hart, a babyface.

Teddy seemed flustered by this and, during one match, it looked as though a real fight was about to break out between him and one of the more vocal East Indian fans.

At some point, Dandy Myers betrayed Randy and joined the Karachi Vice. A "born-again Pakistani," he now wrestles as Mahatma Dhandi. This twist echoed the conversion of Mike Shaw to Makhan Singh back in the day, and there was grumbling behind the scenes about Bruce being stuck in the past. But wrestling's always been about recycling ideas.

Some of Bruce's directions are questionable. One night in January 2005, Dandy Myers bladed for the first time. Maybe he was overzealous with the blade, because he bled buckets. The match raged into the men's washroom in the Legion, a very real pool of the teen's "juice" being mopped up by a janitor minutes later. After the match, a white towel was found outside the dressing room, soaked red with the high schooler's blood.

Dandy is a shy kid, dedicated to wrestling. He's been training with the Harts since the age of fourteen and dreams of making it to WWE someday. He says he can't remember exactly how much he paid to be part of Bruce's wrestling camp, but he figures it was around a couple grand. (Stu, on the other hand, didn't charge the wrestlers he trained.) Dandy's skills have improved vastly since the first time I saw him taking bumps in the Dungeon, back in 2003, but he still seems an inexperienced kid in the ring. He's lanky and awkward, like so many teenage boys, and he doesn't seem ready to be slicing his head open for fans. True, young men have been doing it for decades. Wrestling is a mean business and if you're not tough enough, you don't belong in the ring. But watching Dandy bleed, I couldn't help but feel he was being exploited.

After the match, Dandy came and spoke to Bruce, who praised him for a job well done. Dandy seemed shaken up. Later, I asked him if he was, and he said no. Rather, he was feeling light-headed on account of all the blood he lost. But he's said he's definitely up for another blading when the time comes.

One of the kids approached Bruce after the match and asked if Karnage, who had supposedly injured Dandy, was going to be suspended. "He should be suspended by his foreskin," Bruce answered sternly. I couldn't help but laugh. "I've got a million of 'em," Bruce told me.

But just as in the '80s, Bruce can't seem to take his ego out of the equation when he's running the show, and some say his pettiness is ruining what little business he has left. Young wannabe wrestlers join the Hart training camp hoping to learn the art of pro wrestling and eventually exploit the family's

ties to WWE, New Japan, and indie wrestling promotions around the world. But some of the kids who have moved on to other promotions say they have been discouraged by Bruce. The new Stampede Wrestling has a shortage of capable stars and Bruce is not happy when they leave him.

In June 2005, Randy Myers had just returned from a wrestling tour of England. He was ready to resume his run in Stampede Wrestling when Bruce told him he would not be performing that night. According to those backstage (none of whom wanted to go on the record), Bruce was bitter that Randy had wrestled elsewhere and was barring him from the ring that night to teach him a lesson.

"Faaawwwkk!" yelled the mohawk-sporting wrestler as he burst from the dressing room throwing a plastic bottle of Gatorade across the hall as puzzled fans gawked at him. Alison's daughter Lindsay followed him close behind. "Fucking abortion wrestling!" she spat. At the time of this writing, Randy Myers said his affiliation with Stampede Wrestling was up in the air.

A couple of months earlier, Harry Smith told me, "I'm done with Bruce." Teddy Hart also seems finished with the promotion, and Nattie wasn't sure if her boyfriend T.J. would be returning when he finished his tour of Britain. Even Ross, who worked side by side with Bruce for so long, has had a problem with his brother, insiders say. These days, Bruce is in charge of the Ogden Legion shows while Ross handles the spot shows in small Alberta towns such as Hanna, Cochrane, and Didsbury. Morale is much better at those shows.

Some of the young grapplers feel Bruce doesn't respect them. There's also a strong sentiment that Stampede Wrestling is a sinking ship and their careers would be better off if they disembarked. Bad News Allen worked for the new Stampede Wrestling as an announcer when Bruce and Ross relaunched the show in 1999. He quit when it became obvious there was little money in the promotion in its current incarnation. "It's the same old thing with the Hart brothers," he said in an interview posted on the Slam Wrestling website. "They have no organization at all, everything's done haphazardly.... I can't see them succeeding."

Dan Kroffat has similar sentiments. "They're still pounding away, trying to make it fly, but it will never fly," he says. "If you want to run the Indianapolis 500, take your race to worthy tracks. Don't run it out of a garbage dump. To run it out of the legion hall you'll never attract people."

Even Hart brother Keith thinks Stampede Wrestling is a lost cause. "It's sad," he says. "It doesn't exist anymore, except what [Bruce] pretends. It's defunct but [he's] still going through the motions."

Nattie, ever stuck in the middle of family squabbles, understands the criticisms levelled against Stampede Wrestling. But she considers it her schooling for a career in wrestling. For the Harts who take part in the legacy, it offers a feeling of family unity that has otherwise been lost. When Nattie wrestles, she sees her mother, cousins, and uncles drawn together by that which is in the family's blood. The weekly wrestling matches make her feel closer to her grandfather, too, as in the days when the Hart clan gathered in the dining room for the Sunday dinners and listened to Stu's stories. "We don't have the Sunday dinners anymore," Nattie says. "Now all we have is the wrestling, and it's very special to us."

In 2004, Hart House was sold. The cost of maintaining the crumbling castle was high. The place needed restoration. That, combined with property taxes and the usual bills, forced the Harts' collective hand.

Of course, squabbles ensued over the fate of the mansion. Bruce wanted to keep the house in the family, as he was still using the Dungeon to train wrestlers. He dreamed of turning the place into a shrine, a wrestling museum open to the public – for a price. Smith was still living there and wanted to remain for the rest of his life. Other siblings argued that although the place was near and dear to all of them, it was time to be realistic. The costs were too great, and with all the divisions in the family, no one could agree on where the money should be spent. The place had to go.

In May 2004, the property Stu had bought fifty-three years earlier was sold to Calgary restaurateur Dario Berloni for $1.5 million. He was to take possession in late August. Immediately, the kids started fighting over ownership of certain items. The artwork, antique furniture, beautifully framed pictures, the old title belts and Stampede Wrestling memorabilia, Stu's collection of amateur medals, family heirlooms; who would get what? What would be sold? Keith claims items started disappearing from the house. Martha wanted a framed picture of Owen as a child and Keith promised she could have it. But when he went to the house for it, the picture was gone.

Coaxing fifty-five-year-old Smith out of the house was a comedic misadventure, as Keith tells it, though nobody found it funny at the time. As the siblings rushed to clear out the house for the new owner, Smith grasped at any excuse that kept him from vacating the premises. Smith had all but turned the place into a hostel, according to Keith. "He was charging street people to live there.... They had mattresses dragged in and they were eating old distressed food, frying it up. The place smelled. Smith had this old chunk

Top right: Jim "The Anvil" Neidhart being an affectionate uncle with Harry Smith, son of Davey Boy Smith and Diana Hart, late 1980s. Today, Harry is a star of the new Stampede Wrestling.

Middle: A few stars of the new Stampede Wrestling celebrate the relaunch of the promotion. An ailing Stu Hart is seated among them.

Bottom: Hart House, the base of Stampede Wrestling's operations since 1951—in the days when it was called Big Time Wrestling—was sold in 2004.

of fish he was going to cook while everybody was cleaning frantically around him.... I grabbed this dirty, sour fish and said, 'Forget it, Smith.'"

"What the hell?" Smith answered. "I belong here. You can't throw me out of my own domicile."

Keith raised his fist. "Get out of here or I'll drop you right now." He grabbed the fish and threw it into the dumpster sitting by the back porch. Smith stormed off, threatening legal action. The next day – closing day – Keith got a call from the Harts' lawyer, advising him to finish any last-minute cleanup at the mansion. If the house was not presentable, if Smith was not gone, the deal was off.

Keith arrived back at the mansion and, to his astonishment, his older brother was back, even though the windows were boarded up and the locks had been changed. Smith had climbed up the side of the house and gotten in through one of the balcony windows. "Get the hell out of here," Keith shouted, chasing his brother from the house.

Of the incident, Smith explains he had bought a set of swinging doors to separate the kitchen and dining room. Smith entered the house to remove the doors, to take back what was rightfully his, he says.

Even after Hart House was sold, the hubbub over its fate continued in the press when Berloni announced plans to build apartments and townhouses on the land surrounding the house. He needed to do so, he said, to generate the revenue required to restore the heritage building. He also suggested that the mansion might be turned into a duplex. Bruce blasted the new owner in the media, saying he had no respect for the heritage home. Other family members said they were saddened by the change to the land but realized that Berloni was free to do whatever he wanted with the mansion so long as he didn't tear it down, as was their agreement.

The money from the sale of Hart House was surely welcome by many of the children. Had it not been for that, and the settlement with the WWF after Owen's death, the estate coffers would have been empty. Despite the millions of dollars Stu and Helen made over the years running Stampede Wrestling, bad investments and the lifelong drain of many of their children had run the well dry. A copy of Stu's will shows he deducted six-figure sums from the money left most of his children because of advances he had given them over the years. Houses had been purchased for Bruce, Ellie, and Diana, while Smith, Alison, and Georgia had received substantial financial support. Ross, Wayne, and Keith were more independent. As for Bret, Stu included as part of his will the payment of over $66,000 for a debt he owed his famous son.

But the biggest drain on Stu and Helen's estate could not be deducted from any bequests Stu might have made in his will. That drain was Stampede Wrestling. Fighting the losing battle with Vince McMahon in the late 1980s depleted the Hart estate. Keith blames his brother Bruce for this, who just would not let the dream die. "In the interest of Bruce, my dad blew over a million," Keith says.

The Hart clan has not gotten over the tragedies of the last decade, says Alison. As blow after blow rained down on the family, they picked themselves up and tried to continue, but each hit left them a little more fragile.

"After Owen, our family was like a smile with a big front tooth missing," she says. "He was one of our shining stars. He was always able to make peace. 'Bret, mom and dad need this. Ellie, calm down.' When we lost him, we never got that back."

But the most devastating blow was the loss of Stu. Helen may have been the family's heart, but Stu was its spine. He was the stony pillar that kept the family structure standing, even after all that the Harts had endured. When Stu died, the building blocks crumbled. Several of her brothers and sisters, Alison says, are in flux, trying to carry on. Some of the children have floundered, others have tried to stay as busy as possible. Alison obsesses about the past, talking endlessly about Owen, Stu, and Helen and the unjust universe that plucked them away.

The Harts are a proud lot, and whether they were rich or poor, it was ingrained in the kids that they were special. Many them had a sense of entitlement. The Harts live on Hart time. They do so to the chagrin of nearly everybody they deal with, but that is just too bad. That is the Hart way. Alison talks about the Harts feeling as if they were above the law. They are, for the most part, good, lawful people, she explains, but they live by Hart laws. Stu, for example, felt it was okay to lock ordinary people up in torturous, terrifying submission holds. The Hart kids found no fault in that. They got a kick out of it. Alison even talks about Hart stock and its superior qualities.

This is a family that felt blessed and invincible. "We were raised with a belief in God," Alison says. "But sometimes I think our god was Stu. When I think about it, he's the closet thing I encountered to God in my life. He was not perfect, certainly, but his values were traditional and great."

As the tragedies mounted, and one family member after another died, Alison says her teenage daughters felt angry and cynical. Alison remembers driving to Hart House for Sunday dinner shortly before Stu died. Her daughters spotted a family filing into church. "There's no God," they scoffed.

Alison defended the church-goers. "We're no different," she said. "We're going to our church.... We'd go every Sunday and listen to my dad.... I always came out feeling invigorated and ready to face the week. [Hart House] was my religion. That place was sacred to me."

If Stu's death represented nothing less than the loss of God for some of the Hart children, you wonder if they will ever recover. And, as Alison sees it, if Stu is God, then Vince McMahon is the devil. "I hate Vince McMahon," she says. "I hate him as much as I love my father. He destroyed my family.... He came in and destroyed the territory. There was no more Stampede Wrestling. But he didn't stop at destroying the business. He went even further and had Bret and Davey wrestling each other and Bret and Owen wrestling each other. You're dealing with people with big egos and this caused dissension. It was too much for my dad to control.... [Vince was] the master puppeteer. In his sick, perverted mind ... he thrived on it. After Owen died, we just couldn't pull it together anymore."

But others in the family appear to be moving on. Keith and Ross are level-headed, with positive outlooks on life. Georgia seems to be the family's new mother figure, always bright and smiling, looking out for everybody.

Things looked bleak for Ellie, however, until recently, when a glimmer of hope seemed to enter her world. In a sworn affidavit filed in June 2004 in which Ellie was seeking exclusive possession of the Neidhart home, Ellie alleged that Jim Neidhart, unemployed, typically downed a can of beer each morning before heading to the gym. His first stop after the gym was usually the bar. When he came home, he was drunk and abusive, Ellie claimed. The allegations were never proven in court.

In the winter of 2005, a lawsuit was launched against both Jim and Ellie by a Calgary businessman who alleged the Neidharts went into his home and made off with over $9,000 worth of jewellery which he had to retrieve from a pawnshop.[2] By the time spring rolled around, the lawsuit had been dropped. Jim Neidhart told the *Calgary Sun* that the whole thing was a "misunderstanding between good friends." He explained that he, Ellie, and the man's wife pawned the jewellery to buy a car engine, fully intending to buy the jewellery back. Somehow things were patched up and the lawsuit disappeared. "I'm not the Pink Panther, a thief and a liar," said The Anvil.[3]

But the lawsuit humiliated Nattie, who made a point of defending her mother. "It has zero to do with her," she told me. "[My mom] wasn't even in town when it happened." Rather, she says, her mother was caught up in another one of her dad's scrapes, pulled in because she was the one with the inheritance money, thus the only one worth suing.

Once again, Nattie was tortured by her parents' tumultuous marriage. She struggled when talking about her father. She didn't want to make him angry; she didn't want to sever her relationship with him. "I love my dad," she said. "Part of me wants to honour him with the wrestling. I love going to the ring and doing his laugh and stuff.... Sometimes he really did try, but over the years his problems got out of control.... I feel sorry for the way his life has turned out."

But in June 2005, Nattie told a more hopeful story. When she came back from a successful two-month tour of Japan, her father seemed a changed man. He was trying hard to give up his vices, even cigarette smoking, and was studying to be a real estate agent. He said he was proud of her. He told her he loved her. Nattie had never heard that before. She feels her father is trying to make up for lost time. She says she forgives him for his mistakes and she's proud of him for trying to change his life. "I hope he can stay on this path," she says.

Nattie faces a hard road with the wrestling life she has chosen. She barely saw her boyfriend, T.J. Wilson, in the first half of 2005, as the two were constantly off wrestling in other countries. But she's confident they're going to make it work, and predicts they'll get married someday. She's known T.J. since they were children, when the scrawny latchkey kid hung around Hart House playing with the late Matt Annis. Davey Boy, in particular, took T.J. under his wing, Nattie says. He even let the kid train with him. Ellie says Wilson is one of the family. She compares him to Robert Duvall in the *Godfather* series, the Irish orphan taken in by the Corleones.

Nattie says she's not worried about going down the same dark path as her father and uncles. The new generation of Stampede Wrestlers are mostly a clean bunch, dedicated to their craft and put off by the excesses of the generation before them. When it comes to her and Harry Smith, Nattie says, they're scared of drugs and alcohol. They've seen first-hand the damage it can do.

Ever the family success story, Bret recovered sufficiently from his stroke in 2002 and has reinvented himself. In the Christmas season of 2004 he made his theatrical debut as the Genie of the Lamp in *Aladdin, The Magical Family Musical*, a pantomime production that played at Toronto's Elgin Theatre. Bret is also the voice of the Hooded Fang in the animated TV series *Jacob Two-Two*, based on Mordecai Richler's children's books.

When CBC-TV asked Canadians to nominate the greatest Canadian of all time for a November 2004 series, Bret came in at number thirty-nine, beating out the likes of Bryan Adams, Pamela Anderson, Gordie Howe,

Margaret Atwood, Joni Mitchell, and Sir Wilfred Laurier. The CBC also selected The Hitman as one of the program's celebrity hosts, having him lobby for Don Cherry – loud-mouthed hockey announcer and icon of political incorrectness – as the top Canadian. It was a tough position. Cherry was up against Pierre Elliott Trudeau, John A. Macdonald, and Wayne Gretzky for the top spot. Snooty media pundits argued that Cherry had no business being on the list, and the fact that a pro wrestler was in his corner only added to the mockery. Bret later admitted that in his heart he was rooting for Terry Fox.

At one point, the show involved a debate on the merits of the top ten Canadians, and Bret was outclassed by media know-it-alls Rex Murphy, George Stroumboulopoulos, and Evan Solomon. Still, he came off with dignity as a strong, silent type defending the underdog from the righteous liberal guard at the CBC. If he had done such a program five years earlier, he might have fared better. Insiders say Bret's stroke has slowed down his speech patterns, which put him at a disadvantage dealing with the quick-wits on the CBC panel.

According to family members and a production manager on the *Aladdin* set, the stroke made it difficult for Bret to remember things, including appointments. He also suffers from a stiffness on his left side that he is self-conscious about. He trains three days a week at BJ's Gym, but he'll never have but a fraction of the strength he once had. That depresses him.[4] When I sat down with Bret after one of his workouts, he was open, insightful, and pleasant, even good-humoured. But there was also a sadness about him as he recounted the aftermath of his stroke and the wrestling days that have passed him by.

Bret has talked and written fairly freely about Davey, Dynamite, and Neidhart, acknowledging the destructive choices they made in life that he didn't agree with. But to this day he loves them all dearly. He once wrote of his closest comrades: "I'd trust them to breathe for me. To pump my blood with their hearts."[5] He elaborates on this for me: "It's like joining the army. Once you've been in enough battles together, you bond, you become friends and you never lose that.... Only we understood the sacrifices we made and the price we paid to be who we were."

Some of Bret's siblings accuse him of being an egotist, so wrapped up in his Hitman persona that he's standoffish. They complain that when they want to speak with their own brother, they have to go through his publicist. Bret also tends to hold grudges and obsess over things. He remains incensed at ranking only fourteenth in wrestling historian Greg Oliver's book *The Pro*

Wrestling Hall of Fame: The Canadians, on the top Canadian wrestlers of all time. (Fair enough. The book is wildly Ontario-centric and Oliver even ranks Sky Low Low above Bret. Is he kidding?) And don't get The Hitman started about wrestler Ric Flair, who wrote in his own book that he didn't consider Bret to be one of wrestling's greats.

Bret acknowledges this obsessive, angry side of his personality, but he's trying to change. "I used to dwell on what happened to my brother Owen and all the other tragedies in my life," he told the *Toronto Star.* "In my own way I was carrying a big bag of rocks with a lot of grief inside. I had to pick it up every day, throw it over my back and carry it around. The day I got my stroke, I dropped that bag. I don't worry about the past anymore."[6]

No doubt aiding him in his quest for happiness is his new bride. In September 2004, Bret was married in Milan to a young Italian woman named Cinzia. It was months before he told anyone other than his kids that he had gotten married. Some members of the Hart family didn't find out until they read about it in the newspaper.

Bruce Hart is the Dorian Gray of the wrestling biz. That's how his brother Keith sees it. Like the character from the Oscar Wilde novel, Bruce was in love with his youthful image, the picture of himself as a handsome, valiant wrestling star. Like Dorian Gray, Bruce sought to freeze that image in time.

"Bruce is still substitute teaching and wearing his wrestling boots in the schools," Keith says with exasperation. "He's got those … cowboy boots [which he wears over his pant legs] and he's got his Stampede Wrestling shirts. He's got his bleach-blond hair. He looks like he's about to cut a promo. He's still waiting for his big break."

Keith shakes his head. His fifty-five-year-old brother could have become a full-time teacher and gotten himself a nice pension, but he couldn't get over his obsession with wrestling, even after wrestling long since passed him by. Keith sees Bruce deluding himself into thinking he's still a young, glamorous wrestling star but, as in the story of Dorian Gray, he imagines there's a self-portrait hidden up in his brother's attic that reveals his true appearance. "He [sold] his soul to wrestling," Keith says, "and one day he'll have to look at that picture of Bruce Hart in the dark closet up in his attic and he'll see what he really looks like."

It's a harsh assessment, but Alison agrees that Bruce is stuck in the past. He even reunited with his wife, Andrea, after she had run off with Davey Boy Smith. "He hasn't moved on," she says. "He hasn't changed since 1980. You know that Bruce Springsteen song 'Glory Days'? That's Bruce. I don't

blame him. That's when he was happy and cool. That's when he was on top of the world."

As Bruce sees it, he's simply fulfilling his legacy, carrying on the Hart family tradition. "I think I have an inherent obligation to preserve and perpetuate what wrestling once was.... I'm just an extension of Stu, anyway."

Keith hotly rejects this notion. "Bruce is not representative of my dad," he says. "He thinks he is, but my dad didn't appreciate Bruce's style of pro wrestling.... Bruce was not heroic in my dad's eyes, and that was the saddest thing, maybe for both of them. They both loved wrestling and Bruce was so determined. He loved my dad, but ... my dad never credited him as being anything.... He wasn't a tough guy. He never earned my dad's respect. I think that's the one thing he craved all his life and that's the one thing my dad never gave him. My dad gave him money, status, whatever, usually grudgingly, but he couldn't respect him."

January 2004. Bruce Hart and I sit down in a pub for a marathon three-hour interview over chicken wings and beer. I was there to find out if he would cooperate with me on a book on the history of Stampede Wrestling. He was there to get me to write a story about the new Stampede Wrestling. He tried to convince me that the current product is as dynamic as the wrestling I fell in love with in the early 1980s. "People don't even have a clue how good it is," he says. "It's probably the freshest form of actual wrestling anywhere on the planet."

Bruce is a fantastic storyteller: creative, smart, and funny, with a literary flair. My interviews with him were invaluable, each one uncovering new gems about the sport. But my time with him was limited. After a while, when I didn't write the glowing piece on the new Stampede Wrestling that he was looking for, Bruce cut me off. He stopped returning calls and when I showed up at the Ogden Legion one night to interview him, he ducked out a back exit to avoid me.

Bruce likes to preach, and he did just that while my tape was rolling at the pub that night. But much of what he said was valid. "When I see the garbage that is being construed as wrestling right now [in WWE], I just think it's disgusting and pathetic," he says. "Vince doesn't want to acknowledge it, but the big problem they've got right now is so many of their guys can't wrestle. They can barely lace their stinking boots up, those muscle-bound misfits.... They might know how to crash through a table or hit each other with chairs, but they can't really wrestle, so they resort to all this other garbage. The tits and ass and the props.... The stuff that insults people's intelligence. All the implausible, ass-backwards storylines."

But wasn't Bruce pushing such boundaries back in his heyday, making Stu and Ed Whalen pull their hair out in frustration? Bruce admits as much, but that's not what made Stampede Wrestling special. "The beauty of Stampede was, it was almost all improvisational," he says, his eyes glittering like burning embers. "The secret of improv wrestling is constantly feeding into the crowd, and they feed that energy back to you. The crowd is supposed to be part of the ultimate product, but [in WWE] they're not. Not when the wrestlers are going through these scripted, pre-rehearsed matches.... A great wrestler is like a Van Gogh or a Picasso. They have a vision of what they want to paint and then they creatively render their art. It's not paint-by-numbers. It's not scripted with little diagrams, every little move detailed."

If today's grapplers knew the true art of wrestling, it would save the sport, Bruce says. He's tried to make McMahon see this. For wrestling to survive, he's told McMahon, the wrestlers need to be trained. Stampede Wrestling could be WWE's farm team, the official training ground. But McMahon doesn't take Bruce all that seriously, it seems.

But then, Bruce's ego still gets in the way when opportunities arise. A few years ago, he got a call from MTV. It had teamed up with the WWF to produce a reality TV series called *Tough Enough*, in which contestants competed for a position on the WWF roster. Did Bruce want to send any of his talent for the tryouts? Once again, Bruce felt the WWF was treating him like a flunky. "I sneered at them," he says. "This princess calling me from L.A. and making out like she's offering me some great opportunity. I said, 'The guys I have right now are ten times better than the misfits you're pretending with.'"

Bruce kept promising to show me a movie script he wrote in the mid-1980s. If it had been made, the movie would have been "better than *Rocky*," he says. Instead, the script sits in his home, collecting dust.

"It's about a small wrestling promotion that kind of gets screwed over by a big promotion," Bruce says. The little promotion keeps trudging along, though – even as the giant steals its best talent – and, eventually, the little wrestling group starts to hold its own in the business. "Finally, public sentiment starts turning against the bad guys and, in the end, it comes down to a big showdown in the ring, a shoot match where even the audience thinks there's no way the small guy can win." Of course, in Bruce's script, the small guy does win. The giant is vanquished.

For over twenty years, Bruce Hart has dreamed of writing that ending into his reality: of vanquishing the giant that stole his family's dream. He would love to be the David that takes down the Goliath that is Vince

McMahon. The reality is that he's getting older and rather than getting stronger, he's gotten weaker, while Goliath is more entrenched than ever.

But like Stu, who refused to give up on the business through all the dismal years, like his scrappy grandfather, Edward Hart, who forced his family to live in tents on the harsh, frozen Prairies during a standoff for his land, it's quite possible that Bruce will never give up. Although Bruce has decided to take a year off from Stampede Wrestling – having a family friend run the shows for a season – it's a safe bet that he will be back. He'll keep lobbing stones at Goliath until he's too weak to lift his arm. He'll keep dreaming, fighting, and obsessing until the day he dies, because wrestling is his life. It's the only life he's ever known.

Chapter twenty-one

2007: The Third Generation and Wrestling's Darkest Day

Bret "Hitman" Hart bit down hard on his anger, seething as he sat through *Screwed*, the DVD "tribute" to his career that his old friends from WWE planned to release.

The crude title referred to the infamous "Montreal screw-job," in which Bret was betrayed by Vince McMahon at the 1997 Survivor Series, an act that prompted Hart's exit from the company. The moment still burned, bitter in his chest, when, in that evening's world title match with his hated rival, Shawn Michaels, the ring bell chimed as if Bret — locked in his trademark sharpshooter hold by Michaels — had submitted. That hadn't been the deal. Bret was supposed to retain his belt that night, not be humiliated in front of his Canadian fans. And here was WWE, rehashing the ugly incident yet again — treating it as the centerpiece of the Hitman's career. More than anyone Bret wanted to let that moment go — he knew dwelling on it was poison for the soul — but WWE threw it back in his face every chance they got.

McMahon insisted that it had been Bret's professional obligation to drop the title exactly as his boss wished and, ever the ingenious ideas man, he twisted the situation into an angle that made for huge ratings. "Bret screwed Bret," crowed the grossly sneering kingpin, taunting legions of indignant fans.

Time and time again the screw-job was referenced, parodied and consciously imitated in one storyline after another, mocking Bret and twisting the knife in his back for close to a decade. Even in the old footage, clips of which WWE regularly showed for various promotions, Bret felt he was being ridiculed. Seldom was he shown in moments of victory. Rather, there were

shots of Michaels kicking him in the face, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin making him writhe in pain.

Now, WWE had summarized Bret's career in this vile DVD collection — Screwed. Its worldwide release was imminent. At least the organization thought to approach the Hitman himself to see if he had any suggestions. Was there anything he would like to include?

"I watched the whole thing and told them: 'You can take every bit of it out,'" Bret says with disgust. "It was brutal. They cast me in the worst possible light. They had all these wrestlers, from Michaels to Hulk Hogan, burying me, talking about how difficult I was to work with, saying I was never very good. Hogan said none of the other wrestlers could trust me. . . . Years from now people would remember that, rather than the truth. It was really important for me not to let that go any further."

Of the many injustices Bret felt he had suffered over the years at McMahon's hands, one that ate away at him still, was the ongoing matter of being denied access to his own legacy. Footage of his matches and his photos were all owned by WWE. Bret says that after his brother Owen died, McMahon promised him he could access the material as he wished, but the promoter later denied this. Yet again, Hart felt double-crossed.

But while he loathed the way WWE tarnished his legacy, he was also consumed with keeping his legend alive. He was afraid WWE might suppress his history entirely, "locking it up in a basement."

"I worked so hard and put so much passion into what I did, and for me to stand back and let that be erased — to become nonexistent and unimportant — I don't think it's fair," Hart explains.

McMahon heard Bret's outrage, and in the summer of 2005 the two met for "nose-to-nose negotiations," Bret says. This time, McMahon played nice. Whether he was trying to make up for past indiscretions, or he just saw good business sense in releasing a proper tribute to Bret, McMahon agreed to scrap *Screwed* and develop a new DVD with the Hitman's input. "We can do this your way," Bret recalls McMahon saying. "We can do it any way you want. You can have final approval."

Bret responded: "That's what I've been fighting for all these years."

At the tail end of 2005, WWE released the best-selling DVD retrospective on Bret "Hitman" Hart's career, named after the catch phrase title he had given himself: *The Best There Is, the Best There Was, the Best There Ever Will Be*. It was a collection to be proud of, containing many of Bret's finest moments in the ring, spanning from his Stampede Wrestling roots right up to his final stint in Ted Turner's WCW.

The Hitman's critics might say he made a deal with the devil to preserve his legacy, but Bret defends his decision. He stood by Owen's wife Martha in her lawsuit against WWE, and stood strong in the events surrounding the screw-job, but he wasn't going to see his successful career defined by those disasters. The thought of it ate away at his guts. "I have a right to be remembered," he says defiantly. "I can't carry this stuff around forever. They say the biggest reason I had the stroke was related to stress. . . . I've moved on."

While Bret will always harbour a degree of resentment and mistrust towards McMahon, he admits that being allowed to redo his DVD in a respectful way helped mend fences between the two. "I'll never forget what they did, or forgive it, but at the same time a lot has been done to smooth it out," he says. "A lot of the really hard feelings I had dissipated. . . . If I see Vince, I don't have a problem talking to him or shaking his hand."

Ever the opportunist, McMahon took this new attitude further by inducting Bret into the WWE Hall of Fame. The ceremony took place in Chicago on April 1, 2006, the day before WrestleMania 22.

Bret had his reservations. "There's part of me that thinks, 'These lousy bastards were going to do a smear job on me,' he says, "'Why should I be nice to them?' . . . But Vince... he's the world's greatest used car salesman. He talked me into it." That Bret felt he was finally getting his due as one of WWE's all-time greats was the deciding factor.

Even then, Bret laid down his own ground rules, refusing to attend WrestleMania 22. He also made it known that if Shawn Michaels came anywhere near him he would leave the ceremony immediately. "I can't be around that guy," he said. There were many people in the company Bret didn't relish bumping into. He wasn't looking forward to "phony handshakes" from Hulk Hogan, Ric Flair, or WWE honchos like Pat Patterson either. If he was going to attend this event, he wanted to be surrounded by loved ones — Harts. More specifically, he wanted his kids there, and not just the ones he fathered, but also those in the family tree to whom he was passing the torch.

Bret's induction into the WWE Hall of Fame was a highlight of the Mania weekend. He was introduced by no less a superstar than "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, who said he considered their match at WrestleMania 13 to be the greatest of his career. He described Bret as a master storyteller in the ring, while playfully chiding him for that frustrating Hart trait of tardiness. [1]

Bret gave a long-winded but entertaining speech where he told funny stories about Stu, Owen, Jim Neidhart, and even McMahon. He also took a subtle dig at Hulk Hogan, who looked displeased to hear it, and when he

brought up the screw-job, his fans drowned Chicago's Rosemont Theatre in boos. When they began to chant: "One more match!" Bret was visibly moved. "I wish I could have one more match," he told them.

Bret also talked about how hard it had been during the course of his career to be constantly on the road, missing his children, while busy "entertaining everyone else's kids." At that, the camera panned in on a crop of Stu's grandchildren. With a healthy helping of the old Hart genetics they were a good-looking bunch. Bret's children seemed shy but proud. His oldest son Dallas, then twenty-one, who wore a solemn look not unlike his father's, seemed sturdily built, something that may serve him well as he's reportedly considering a career in the wrestling business

Then there was cocky Teddy Hart, always a magnet for the spotlight, dressed in a white suit which contrasted with his dark Mediterranean skin. He glowered arrogantly, almost maliciously, into the camera eye. Beside him sat a smiling Nattie Neidhart, who looked elegant and poised in a low-cut black cocktail dress which enhanced her eye-catching curves. She was testing the waters on a new, decidedly diva-like look, far removed from the squat, female Anvil that her Stampede Wrestling fans were accustomed to. Next to her was her boyfriend, handsome T.J. Wilson, his head shaved save for a small strip of hair that cropped his forehead. At the end of the row sat a towering Harry Smith. Both young men emitted that classic aura of the firm-jawed, strong silent type.

The day following the ceremony, Bret, true to his word, did steer clear of WrestleMania. Instead he headed back to his many projects — notably an autobiography, which he hoped to release in the fall. It is expected to be a revealing, no-holds-barred piece of work sure to inflame egos within the wrestling business and the Hart family. Bret also returned to his young wife Cinzia and the amusing challenges of trying to adapt to life in her Italian home, where the couple spends much of their time. "I like Italy, it's beautiful," says the exasperated Hitman. "But it's not home and it's never going to be. . . . I miss Calgary. I miss hockey . . . I won't be away for too long. . . . I'm making my moves to get her back in Canada where they have 7-Elevens and pancake breakfasts and you can get a quart of milk at noon. God knows why they take these breaks in the middle of the day — these siestas."

But while Bret's legacy has come full circle, his work that weekend done, for the new generation of Harts, business had only begun. There seemed to be serious interest shown to the clan's all-but-adopted son T.J. Wilson, for one thing. Dubbed the Stampede Kid in recent years, in homage to the Dynamite Kid — on account of T.J.'s technically sound, high-flying style — the young

buck had grown into an excellent wrestler and WWE was taking notice. Nattie also attracted their attention. Given his enormous talent, ego to match, and reputation as a slick operator, it's hard to believe Teddy wasn't in on talks as well, although he had many other high-profile gigs on the horizon that did not include WWE.

As for Harry, the nineteen-year-old son of Davey Boy Smith signed a contract with WWE that very weekend. The company had been courting Harry since he graduated from high school two years earlier. This kid was born for the squared circle. He had been tempted to sign with WWE the moment they offered him a contract, but was level-headed enough to determine he wasn't ready. First he wanted to make his name in Japan, much as his father had.

But at the WrestleMania 22 weekend, WWE's vice president of talent, John Laurinaitis, made Harry an offer he'd have been a fool to refuse. Laurinaitis told Harry some of the promotion's top heavyweights were off injured and the company was in need of a new face. There was supposedly an immediate opportunity for him on WWE's flagship TV program, *Raw*. "He said 'The time is here,'" Harry recalls. "'We'll bring you in a year from now, but we're not sure if this same position will be available.'" The Junior Bulldog signed on for an undisclosed sum that reportedly had him earning far more than the average rookie. As Harry understood it, he was bypassing WWE training camps and going straight to TV.

Harry, who stresses that he's a clean-living kid with an aversion to the steroids, painkillers and multiple excesses that destroyed his father, is not concerned about stepping on those landmines. Can it be avoided, though, in the big time, where wrestlers often must turn to pills to perform at their peak, even when they're injured? "The WWE is doing very strict drug testing right now," answers the polite but guarded lad. Harry has an air of determination about him, verging on single-mindedness. He's pleasant but stoic, to the point where, at times, he seems almost robotic. "They're even testing for pills. If they find some sort of muscle relaxant in your system, you have to have a doctor's prescription for it, otherwise you're going to fail the test.

"It's a very hard, very fast lifestyle," he acknowledges, "but I'm pretty sure I can avoid the pitfalls."

Harry isn't about to let any negativity slow him down. He talks eagerly about the dreams that now seem so close, that he will one day step into the ring with some of the federation's top stars. "When I get to the WWE, I'm very confident in my wrestling ability," he said, shortly after signing. "I won't

Top: Chris Benoit.

Bottom: Teddy Hart and Colt Cabana at a Wrestling Society X taping.

bring down Davey Boy Smith's name or the Hart family name. I want to go there and be Canada's greatest star."

A Stampede Wrestling super-card? The very idea seemed little more than a nostalgic pipe dream in 2006. But Harry Smith's last match for the promotion — held on May 12 in the town of Cochrane, just west of Calgary — was a relatively big-time affair, as far as the small-time business of Stampede Wrestling goes these days.

The night's drawing power — the show brought in about 460 fans, at least tripling that of the average Stampede card in the modern era — was due to more than just Harry's last stand in the promotion, though that was a big selling point. This evening also saw the return of one of the most fearsome Stampede Wrestling heels of all time, Abdullah the Butcher. Another name brought in from Stampede's glorious past was the Honky Tonk Man. Lance Storm, a graduate of the Dungeon, and the massive Rhyno, both of whom had memorable runs in WWE, were also booked.

When an ego-bruised Bruce Hart had walked away from Stampede Wrestling in disgust the previous summer — sick about the loss of his beloved Dungeon and stung, feeling that many in his stable had turned on him — it looked like the promotion's days were numbered once again. It survived only because of the efforts of one man — Bill Bell. A good-intentioned old salt with a wooly gray mustache and a laid-back demeanor, Bell first came into the picture as an investor in 1999 when Bruce and Ross relaunched Stampede Wrestling. He watched with dismay as Stampede fell into a state of demoralizing disarray, and when a resentful Bruce let go of the reins, Bell agreed to grab hold, with the family's permission, hoping to guide the rickety wagon back on track.

Though morale is generally higher amongst the grapplers now that Bell's running the show, he's facing the same problems Bruce did when it comes to drawing crowds. "Most weeks I lose money," he says. "The odd show I'll make a $200 profit, but then the next week I'll lose $1200."

Financial odds of that sort would have most sensible men looking for an escape hatch, but Bell's big heart and genuine love of the Stampede tradition keeps him going. "I do it because I like the guys, and if I don't do it right now, no one else will," he explains. "It will die. And Stampede Wrestling has always meant so much in this community. My dreams have been dampened, but I'll carry on as long as I can."

Despite Bruce's continued passion for wrestling, Ross doesn't believe his brother will ever come back to the business, as much as that hurts his heart.

Bruce was crushed, humiliated by his final years in the game, and his pride, which kept him hanging on for so long, now prevents him from returning.

But Bell has done an admirable job, says Ross, gratefully. "The wrestling is not a break-even proposition, but Bill never complains."

However, Bell found it tough to say goodbye to a fan favourite like Harry and he wanted to make sure the Junior Bulldog got a hero's send-off. The Cochrane supercard fit the bill beautifully. But Bell was not the prime mover behind the show. That was twenty-three-year-old Devon Nicholson. A mean-looking customer, six-foot-three with a rock solid build, long dark hair and a pair of wicked sideburns that frame his jaw like sharp crescent moons, Nicholson originally hailed from Ottawa. He had been working for Stampede Wrestling and training under Bruce since his late teens, but he had turned sour on the promotion, where he was seldom given the push he felt he deserved. Fed up and eager to move on, he had his sights set on gigs in Puerto Rico and Japan and had also scored a few dark matches with WWE — the non-televised undercard bouts at televised events. With these, Nicholson hoped to wow the promotion and get himself signed.

To further impress them, Nicholson wanted to be able to boast that he had worked an unforgettable main event at an arena-level Stampede Wrestling show. For this, he reasoned, he would need big names, and he was prepared to organize the show himself, putting up the money needed to get it done. Nicholson approached Bell about doing such an event under the Stampede Wrestling banner and Bell agreed to go along for the ride.

A number of reasons were given for the show being held in Cochrane as opposed to Calgary, where it would have drawn a larger crowd. It was much cheaper to rent Cochrane's Spray Lakes Arena as opposed to a Calgary venue. More importantly, Nicholson wanted to stage the sort of epic bloodbath that would make him notorious and he didn't need the Calgary Boxing and Wrestling Commission breathing down his neck. In Cochrane, he was out of their reach.

But the big night wasn't as magnificent as he'd hoped. Nicholson was livid when Rhyno neglected to appear for his match with Lance Storm, causing Storm to back out as well rather than taking on a lesser name.

But two matches that evening were indeed unforgettable, for very different reasons. Nicholson's main event with Abdullah, which ended the show, had little to do with the artful side of pro wrestling. For one thing, there was no convincing storyline to build up this intense blood feud Nicholson wanted to sell the crowd. Leading up to the match, some half-baked pretense was created that the two had a score to settle from a previous meeting in Puerto Rico, and Nicholson ranted about this as a seventy-year-old, grossly overweight Abdul-

lah waddled towards the ring. Walking seemed to be a challenge for him, never mind wrestling, and it was unclear whether or not Abdullah was going to be able to climb the stairs up to the mat. It didn't matter. Nicholson kicked him in the head as he was making his ascent, and in the next instant he had opened up a cut in The Butcher's mangled forehead. The spectacle continued in this vein for a while, with Nicholson working over the legendary fiend.

Then, the tide changed. Abdullah was suddenly brandishing a bottle, seemingly out of nowhere, which he smashed on the ring post. Shards of glass flew everywhere, the mini-explosion echoing a nasty pop through the arena. The next thing anyone knew, Abdullah had Nicholson by the hair and began sawing into the young man's forehead with the broken bottle with such ferocity it looked like he was going to remove the grappler's face, Hannibal Lecter style. There were hardcore wrestling fans in that audience and they had seen many a bloody match, but the crowd seemed genuinely shocked by this gruesomely surreal display. Abdullah battered his foe from one corner of the arena to another, administering punishment on the gash he had slashed into Nicholson's forehead. Soon Nicholson's face was a deep dark red, which ran all the way down his chest, only the whites of his eyes peering out from the gore. The match ended in an insane blur with a wheezing Abdullah vanishing into his dressing room and a maniacal Nicholson shrieking himself hoarse with profanity-choked challenges.

Abdullah was supposed to come back out for more, but his engine was blown. "He doesn't usually go that long," Nicholson says, praising his aged enemy. "This was almost fifteen minutes of solid fighting. I think he just wanted to prove he still had it."

Back in the dressing room, Nicholson felt like he was going to pass out from all the blood he had lost. He says he took twelve stitches, after the nurse picked all the bits of glass out of his forehead. But before he allowed any stitching to be done, he shot a promo, soaked in blood, in which, he raged that he would have his revenge. Nicholson had filmed his entire match that evening, hoping to impress WWE. Bell, who was pissed off at how ridiculously violent things had gotten, shook his head. "That's not going to impress Vince. He's got plenty of guys that'll bleed buckets for him every night."

Stu Hart would have hated the match too. He didn't mind blood at the climax of the sort of epic battles Abdullah used to have in his heyday, but he would have seen this as two gorillas slicing each other open for cheap heat. It was completely gratuitous and lacking any sort of ring psychology. As for old Ed Whalen, he would have had Stampede Wrestling banned for all eternity.

On the other hand, both men would have been thrilled with the match

that preceded it between Harry Smith and T.J. Wilson. Stu in particular would have beamed with pride. Harry was, of course, his blood grandson, but T.J. was like a grandkid too, and they both wrestled beautifully, doing the family name proud.

T.J. had been a part of the Hart family since he was ten years old, when he started hanging around the mansion as a friend of Teddy Hart. "He was a really scrawny little kid," laughs Nattie Neidhart. "He was one of Ted's friends that really got on my nerves, actually. . . . But he became such a big part of our family because he loved wrestling so much. My grandparents embraced him as one of their own grandchildren because he was at the house as much as anybody."

Wilson is a private young man, and Nattie respects this, steering clear of the exact circumstances of her boyfriend's early life. But it's clear he left home at an early age, opting instead to live with the Hart family. T.J. idolized Davey Boy Smith, and for a time, the little stray lived with him and Diana, becoming very close to Harry. Nattie speaks fondly of T.J. working out with Davey and Owen teaching him how to do backflips when he was still a boy. One of the highlights of his childhood was being flown to WrestleMania 12 as Owen's personal guest.

When the third generation of Harts started training seriously, T.J. was right in there with them taking his bumps alongside Harry and Teddy. They were also all a part of a short-lived promotion for young wrestlers, called Mat Rats. At the age of fifteen, T.J. wrestled his first pro match.

T.J and Harry were like brothers, and they were born to wrestle together, whether as a tag team or against one another, as was the case in Cochrane. This was evident in the superb match they had. From start to finish it was a technically sound dance, full of daredevil aerial moves and hard-slamming, fast-paced action. Harry and T.J. would anticipate each others every maneuver, each move complimenting the last with razor-sharp precision. It was a work of art.

While working as a Stampede Wrestling tag team, the two had been dubbed the Stampede Bulldogs, in homage to the British Bulldogs, and it was easy to see how fitting that was. More and more they resembled the classic team, with Harry bringing the brute strength possessed by his late father, and the smaller, faster T.J — Stampede Kid — rocketing through the air, Dynamite style.

Harry and T.J. wrestled brilliantly that night and their match could have easily been the main event, ending the evening on a high note that was classy, exciting, and even heart-warming. Instead, the night ended up in a

blood-gurgling gutter with Abdullah and Nicholson. To be certain, both matches thrilled the fans, each representing the polar extremes of the pro wrestling game.

But that wasn't all that seemed certain, that evening in Cochrane. It also seemed a sure bet that Harry Smith's star was on the rise as his fellow wrestlers carried him triumphantly on their shoulders while the crowd cheered adoringly, in praise of the latest Stampede Wrestling graduate on his way to the top.

Would the Hart Foundation rise again in WWE? That was the skinny in wrestling circles everywhere at the beginning of 2007 when word got out that Nattie Neidhart and T.J. Wilson had been signed to developmental deals by the company. Both of them were bound for the Deep South Wrestling promotion and training camp in Atlanta, where wrestlers contracted to WWE fine tune their skills before being promoted to the big show.

Bringing Nattie and T.J. aboard, WWE's creative team was trying to set the wheels in motion for a new, third-generation Hart Foundation, with Harry as the muscle, T.J. as the high-flying honorary Hart (much like Brian Pillman in the '90s), and, in the age of divas, Nattie as the first female Hart to hit the ring.

This made sense of Harry's situation, which had proven frustrating for his fans since WWE recruited him the previous May. Despite the fanfare when he left Stampede Wrestling, and Harry's own understanding that he was headed directly to the *Raw* spotlight, WWE barely used him in the months after his arrival, regardless of the fact that he was on the payroll and rumored to be making more money than the average mid-card wrestler who appeared on TV every week. It had to be embarrassing for Harry that after trumpeting his imminent arrival on *Raw*, he was immediately kept behind the scenes. It was hard to find out how he felt about it, because he was barred from giving interviews not approved by WWE.

Why weren't they giving the lad his promised and paid-for shot? His ring skills were solid and he certainly had the right look. As part of the Hart/Bulldog lineage, there was more than enough fodder with which to cook up a compelling angle. Maybe it was his mic skills? Harry needed work in that department to be sure. When cutting a promo he was far too stiff, emotionless even, and in WWE, charisma was everything. Was Harry somehow bombing? Rumours suggesting so began circulating when he was taken off WWE's touring roster and sent to the developmental territories, which he believed he was bypassing when he inked his deal.

Nattie — now going by the more-girlie Natalie, as she was named on the WWE website — shot down any notion that Harry was being marginalized. "They have big plans for Harry in the long term . . . main event plans," she said defensively. "They don't want him making a debut that's not meaningful. . . . They want to wait for the right moment, and they want him to be as prepared as possible."

It wasn't just a matter of getting Harry, T.J. and Nattie prepared that was holding up the proposed Hart Foundation relaunch. WWE was also looking to recruit Teddy Hart. Teddy's daredevil moves were phenomenal, easily among the best in the business, and he seemed to be driven by a hair-raising combination of crazy and fearless that gave the stunts a razor edge other high flyers didn't possess. At the same time, his recklessness had many shaking their heads. "In four years he'll be in a wheelchair," Bob Leonard once remarked when asked about Stu's wild-child grandson, in many ways the black sheep of the third generation.

Serious injuries seemed a distinct possibility. Harry tells of a 2006 match his cousin had in Germany where Teddy did a moonsault from the top of a twenty-five-foot lighting tower, flying towards eight wrestlers who didn't catch him properly. Instead Teddy crashed through a chair at ringside, gashing himself badly under his armpit, dangerously close to an artery. An incident at an independent show in New Jersey had the Internet buzzing when Teddy climbed on top of a soda machine, launching himself at his opponent. There was another miss, and Teddy struck the concrete so hard that the bout was stopped briefly while he disappeared to the parking lot to vomit. Still, he returned to the ring and won the match.

But despite his exciting work, Teddy had developed notoriety on the independent circuit as a troublemaker who promoters couldn't control, either in the ring, or out of it, when he cut his off-the-wall promos. In these profanity-filled rants, Teddy had been known to demean the promotions he was working for and occasionally spoil storylines. He would also exude an arrogance that won him a cult following of both hardcore fans and serious detractors, whom he dismissed as "player-hating sons of bitches."

"If there was pussy around, you guys would be cock-blocking the shit out of me," he crowed in one interview, "just like you're trying to cock-block me out of being the champion!"

He was fond of declaring: "Don't let your girl watch my tapes because she might get wet, and it won't be sweat. And you might as well throw her out of the bed, because you know she's thinking 'bout Ted!" It was an extreme version of the God's-gift-to-women trip so many wrestlers had

employed over the years. But when he got too excited, Teddy took the sexually explicit jive to places that made promoters wince, talking about raping his opponents and comparing it to pimps beating their hookers. "You're gonna have to cut a pace you've never cut before," he sneered at one foe. "It's gonna be like a porno. Whoever can last the longest blows the biggest shot in the end."

When word got out that WWE wanted Teddy for the new Hart Foundation, many feared the worst. Family members and friends who didn't want to be named worried that Teddy's self-destructive behavior might ruin the opportunity for everybody. Showing up late, telling off agents, refusing to take orders — such shenanigans would not fly in WWE.

But whether he's being worshiped or despised, there's no doubt Teddy provokes great passion in fans. He pushes buttons in ways his cousins do not. He's brash, insolent, dangerous, a charismatic young shark, and, if they could somehow harness all that manic energy, WWE had to know he would be the new Hart Foundation's biggest heat score. Could it be that Teddy was the linchpin? That WWE was waiting on his availability before they launched the team?

If so, this presented a problem. Teddy was contracted to a new MTV promotion, called *Wrestling Society X*. Sold as a sort of underground fight club and featuring hardcore bands to match the hardcore action — with a shock and awe presentation that included flame throwers and fireworks incorporated into the matches — WSX debuted to mostly derisive reviews early in 2007. Nevertheless, if the show became enough of a hit that it warranted a second season, Teddy could be stuck there contractually, even though he was said to be itching to jump to WWE.

But Nattie doesn't seem concerned that her hot-headed cousin might derail the new Hart Foundation. She's confident they have a future in WWE with or without Teddy. "I'm used to Ted," she says. "He marches to his own drummer. Nobody tells him what to do. . . . One thing about him, he always lands on his feet. He's burned some bridges, for sure... but he makes his own choices. If he comes to the WWE and does a great job, he'll thrive."

While WWE has worked behind the scenes, once again readying Stampede-grown talent for a worldwide audience, the Stampede Wrestling soap opera continues to roll.

In the summer of 2006, WWE purchased the Hart family's Stampede Wrestling footage for an undisclosed sum. The deal was complicated because any footage featuring Bret was owned exclusively by him, Ross says, and he

refused to relinquish control over it. Ultimately this lessened the value of the collection and the Harts fetched considerably less money than they might have. The fact that Ross brokered the deal also seemed to rub some of his siblings the wrong way, as they wanted a piece of the pie. Ross planned to disperse the money accordingly once expenses were paid.

In a sad piece of news, another Stampede star passed away in March, 2007. Bad News Allen, who had so terrified Calgary in the 1980s, died of heart failure at the age of sixty-three. Even though he had been experiencing heart problems for years, family and friends were shocked. "He never smoked, never drank alcohol, never did any drugs whatsoever," said the wrestler's wife Helen. "No poisons would pass his lips."

Nattie Neidhart, so often caught in the middle of family squabbles and Stampede dramas in the past, tried to stay fairly removed from it all. Her dream to wrestle for WWE is so close, and she remains focused. "I had to get selfish and start thinking about me, because only I can make it happen for myself," she says. In recent years there were many hurtles that Nattie had to overcome, one of which nearly ended her wrestling career altogether.

In November 2005 Nattie was wrestling in Osaka, Japan, when she suffered a devastating knee injury during a practice session before an evening match. On that unlucky day, when the booker asked Nattie if she was comfortable with high-flying, she had no trouble telling him she was. She had learned such stunts as a teenager while training with her cousins. Flying wasn't really a part of her repertoire, but she certainly considered herself up to the challenge.

According to the plan, she was supposed to do a moonsault off the top turnbuckle, crashing into a male Mexican wrestler who would be sent sprawling. Unfortunately, there was a communication breakdown and the Mexican didn't carry through with the stunt as planned.

"At that point I was kind of fearless," Nattie recalls. "I'd never injured myself, not even a sprained thumb. A broken nail, maybe. So I went off the top rope, and . . . the guy caught me perfectly, but he didn't take the bump. The whole point of the move was I was supposed to knock him down, but he caught me and stayed standing. I did the backflip and landed on my feet with my legs perfectly straight, which caused my knees to hyperextend."

Nattie flashes back to that moment when her left leg twisted and she heard her knee make an awful popping sound, so horrible to her she now equates it with a gun going off. "I remember a surge of heat shooting through me and I felt the most extreme pain," she says. "I just fell on my bottom . . . like a little kid."

She sat there, stunned, for about 15 seconds as a sickly wave of fear rose in her stomach. What if she couldn't perform that night? She was on the poster for that evening's match, which was kicking off within the hour. She couldn't back out. This panic drove her back to her feet and she assured her colleagues she was all right, somehow masking her pain. She walked around the ring, telling herself that as long as she could walk, she could perform. And she did. In fact, she finished the remainder of her three-week tour, no doubt aggravating the injury considerably every time she wrestled.

Nattie knew something was terribly wrong. She lacked stability in the knee and her hellishly tender kneecap was constantly popping out of its socket. She didn't have travel insurance and a visit to the doctor might have set her back at least a grand she didn't have. She didn't even have Advil and she was too afraid to ask for it. If the promoters knew her true condition, she feared they'd send her home. Nattie wouldn't allow her reputation to be soiled in this way, so she wrapped her leg tightly before every match, bit her lip, and carried on.

When she arrived back in Calgary, a trip to the doctor revealed that she had torn her anterior cruciate ligament in half. Sure, she could walk on the thing — "You can walk to Texas on a torn ACL," her doctor told her — but jumping, running, squatting, any pivoting whatsoever, and the kneecap would pop loose. "He gave me a nine-month death sentence of no wrestling at all," Nattie says. Couldn't she just wear a brace, she argued? If she chose to do that, the doctor told her, the cartilage in her knee would continue to erode and her career would be very short indeed. No, she was going to need surgery — a new ACL built — and extensive rehabilitation therapy afterwards. "Lucky for me I was able to use the Bret Hart Gold Card," Nattie jokes. "I got the surgery two-and-a-half weeks later."

After the operation, during those first grueling weeks of physiotherapy, Nattie grew frustrated, fearing she'd never regain her former strength. "I felt so sorry for myself," she says. "I was in a horrible state. I'm usually a happy person and I had never been depressed like that before. Bret and I went for dinner and I told him I was going to quit wrestling. I had already applied to go back to school to be an English teacher."

It was the trip to the Hall of Fame that pulled Nattie out of her funk. At the ceremony she spoke with so many wrestlers who had experienced far worse injuries than hers. Then and there, the Anvil's daughter was determined to get back in the game. "I felt like my business in wrestling wasn't done," she says.

One meeting that particularly inspired Nattie was with WWE's top talent

agent, John Laurinaitis, who assured her that the company was interested in working with her, provided she fine-tuned her body. "Johnny never came out and said, 'You're fat,'" Nattie stresses. But she quickly got the message: "It was the weight that was standing in my way." As Laurinaitis explained it, WWE is a public company, a multimedia giant that sells everything from video games to dolls to, of course, hit TV shows. Image was everything. He reminded Nattie: "The camera is very unforgiving."

Rather than take offense, Nattie got on board with WWE's thinking. "This is showbiz and if you're a representative of the WWE, how you look is important," she says. "You can't look like the Cuban Assassin if you're going to work for that company . . . You've got to look sexy."

Returning to Calgary, Nattie hooked up with a personal trainer and radically revamped both her diet and her fitness regime. Within months she saw results. When she injured herself in Japan, Nattie weighed 175 pounds. As of this writing she's lost twenty-five, and would like to lose at least ten more. Her Uncle Ross worries that if she gets too light she will lose her considerable strength. But Nattie insists becoming too petite is the least of her worries. "My mom is really short and my dad is really wide, so I'm fighting off these hippopotamus genes," she laughs — a boisterous, raspy sort of cackle, not unlike her dad's. "I'll always be a work in progress."

She's done a commendable job in transforming herself. At her Stampede Wrestling farewell match in January 2007 she didn't appear in the old pink and black number, reminiscent of her father's ring outfit, which Ross helped her design. ("Don't go to Ross for your style choices," she jokes.) Instead she was dressed to kill, wearing a leopard skin top and a curve-accentuating vest along with skin-tight black pants and white boots with black hearts. Her long blonde hair was styled fetchingly and she put on a cute, endearing smile for the fans. She was very much a doll, albeit a formidable action figure.

Nattie has gone so far as to pose for a series of seductive, cheesecake pics on her website, including a series of revealing bikini shots in keeping with the style of WWE divas. "The WWE noticed," she says. "They told me they appreciated that."

A second set of shots go for the more subtle, smoldering approach, with Nattie posed on a bed in a black cocktail dress, her hair pinned back stylishly. These photos were taken by a Los Angeles–based fashion photographer, a session set up by none other than Billy Corgan, eccentric frontman of famed alternative rock band Smashing Pumpkins. Nattie met Corgan, a huge wrestling fan, at the Hall of Fame ceremony and, in an unexpected twist, the two made a connection.

In what could easily be interpreted as a crush on Corgan's part, he kept in contact with Nattie after their meeting, leaving her gentle messages on her answering machine, encouraging her in her training. At one point, when Nattie visited Corgan in L.A., he even played her a song on his acoustic guitar. The rock star also thanks her in the liner notes of the Smashing Pumpkins' 2007 release, *Zeitgeist*. Whether or not Corgan was indeed smitten, the relationship never moved beyond friendship as Nattie remains committed to T.J. "He's very private, and I often feel like I never want to talk about him," Nattie says of Corgan. "But I also feel like I want to show him gratitude. . . . Billy made me believe in myself."

So has the newer, sexier Natalie Neidhart fully embraced the domain of the WWE diva, where the *Girls Gone Wild*–style segments are as important to the storyline as the actual wrestling? There's an argument to be made that old school female wrestlers, the kind whose work in the ring took priority over their cup size, are a dying breed in North America. That makes Nattie — who took her lumps in the Dungeon and in the brutal world of Japanese wrestling — special. Is she, in a sense, lowering herself by aspiring to join the diva club? Is she selling out for the glitter of WWE?

Nattie is quick to defend women's wrestling in that company. "It's not dead in the water," she says. "[The women] are expected to be tough in the ring and athletic, even if they are swimsuit models." She stresses: "I'm not trying to change me, but I am trying to change my image because that's helping me open the door to my dreams. If it takes wearing a cute little bikini, well, those bikini shots were fun to do. They gave me confidence."

At the same time, Nattie's determined to be much more than just another WWE sexpot. Her ultimate goal is to hold the Woman's World title and make a lasting impact on women's wrestling. "I've grown up in the business. I have an understanding other women in the company maybe don't. . . . I don't want people to just say, 'Nattie Neidhart is a lady wrestler.' No, Nattie Neidhart is carrying on a legacy that her grandfather started fifty years ago. She's upholding that family's honour . . . and she's touching uncharted waters for divas in WWE."

The future seemed filled with promise. After so many years of anguish, it appeared as if things might at last be turning around for the Hart clan. But such contentment was not meant to be.

On June 25, 2007, the dark, cursed cloud that seemed to loom over the Stampede Wrestling family for so many years reared its head once again with a stormy vengeance.

When the news broke that Monday, the world reacted with shock and horror. Stampede graduate Chris Benoit, also known as the Canadian Crippler, had been found dead in his home outside of Atlanta, along with his wife Nancy and their seven-year-old son Daniel. It was the most devastating bomb to drop on the wrestling world since the tragic death of Owen Hart more than eight years before, and the media flocked ravenously. The Harts, who had played such an important role in the early stages of Benoit's career, once again found themselves in the international spotlight.

The case was beyond grisly, surreal in its brutality, and, as police uncovered the story the following day, it heaped more disgrace on the wrestling world than ever before. Those who had known and worked with Benoit over the years experienced heartache, pain and disbelief as they struggled to come to grips with the respected grappler's shameful and repulsive end.

According to police, the five-foot-ten, 220 pound wrestler from Edmonton had strangled his wife the previous Friday night with a cable TV wire. She was found face down on the floor of the Benoits' family room in Fayetteville, south of Atlanta, with her hands and feet bound, the bruising on her back suggesting that he stuck his knee there as he choked the life from her, smashing her face on the floor after she died.

Benoit's son was believed to have been murdered the following morning. He was found in his bed, the victim of a fatal chokehold. Posters of his father, whom he idolized, adorned the walls of his bedroom. In a ghastly twist, the police said bruising on Daniel's body indicated that he may have been killed by a modified version of his father's famed wrestling hold, The Crippler Crossface. Many believe that in Benoit's mind Daniel's murder was a mercy-killing. With his mother dead at the hand of his father, the boy's life would be too painful. Better to end it, Benoit may have believed.

Benoit lingered in the house for hours, until early on Sunday morning when he went into his basement gym, wrapped the steel chord from a lat pulldown machine tightly around that powerful, bulging neck, and released the machine's weight stack, effectively hanging himself.[2]

Benoit had often told the press how important his family was to him, and those close to the former WWE world heavyweight champion confirm that he loved them dearly. People were especially shocked that he could kill his beloved Daniel. He was said to have worshipped the boy.

Considering the time he spent alone with their dead bodies, left to ponder his horrible deed, and the fact that he placed Bibles next to them before killing himself, it's difficult to imagine that Benoit's final hours were anything but torturous, filled with agonizing guilt.

Then there was the spate of odd text messages Benoit had sent to at least two undisclosed WWE co-workers before he killed himself Sunday morning. These stated his address several times, the fact that his German Shepherds were in "the enclosed pool area," and that his "garage side door (was) open." It was as if Benoit was leading authorities to the scene before ending his life.

He had been scheduled to wrestle that weekend — in Beaumont, Texas on Saturday night and at a Houston pay-per-view on Sunday. When he called WWE on Saturday afternoon to say he wouldn't be making that evening's match, a co-worker noted that he sounded groggy. Stranger still, out of nowhere Benoit said: "I love you." He also claimed that his wife and son were sick with food poisoning and throwing up blood.[3] Was he grasping, desperate to make up some sort of excuse for the two deaths he had on his hands? Had he lost his grip on reality altogether? It's impossible to know.

When Benoit failed to show up for Sunday's match — something very out of character for the dedicated grappler — WWE tried to reach him at home. They got no answer. On Monday, when WWE officials caught wind of the bizarre text messages Benoit had sent, they contacted the Fayetteville County sheriffs office requesting that police check in on the family.[4]

According to WWE, once they were informed of the deaths they cancelled that night's live event and instead put together a three hour tribute to their fallen star, not yet realizing the disturbing details of the case.

The Benoit memorial show, which aired on their flagship Monday night program, *Raw*, is perhaps the biggest PR disaster in the company's history, worse even than their decision to go on with the show the day Owen Hart plunged to his death in Kansas City.

While the show aired, featuring anguished WWE stars heaping praise on Benoit between replays of his most glorious in-ring moments, it became clear that the crime scene was being investigated as a murder-suicide.

At one point during the broadcast Benoit was shown with his wife and child after one of his greatest victories. With tears of emotion welling in his eyes, he takes hold of his son and kisses the little boy tenderly, a moving show of love from a father to his son.

What was meant to be touching became horrifying and twisted — a new and disgusting low for wrestling. Imagine the NFL paying tribute to O.J. Simpson following his descent into infamy. That would be unimaginable, but apparently, to the public, WWE was not above such tastelessness.

In truth, it was probably more a stunningly bad judgment call than anything else. By the next day WWE had pulled all Benoit tributes from its website and was taking pains to distance itself from any association with the

Canadian Crippler. Appearing on TV's *Today* show, Vince McMahon said that Benoit was known as a "mild-mannered individual," adding "there was no way of telling this man was a monster."[5]

But WWE's initial response — to venerate its star despite the circumstances, which stank of a possible domestic dispute from the start — reflected the state of denial that permeated the entire wrestling world after the tragedy.

In a business that has more than its share of wild men and abusive, raging, loose canons, there was, to be sure, countless wrestlers who could conceivably come to such a disgraceful end. But Chris Benoit was not one of them. By most accounts he was a sensible, soft-spoken gentleman, a professional who lived for his family and the wrestling game. He loved kids and had been involved with many children's charities. In the days that immediately followed the tragedy, few of his former colleagues had anything negative to say about Benoit.

"He was one of the solid guys," said Bret Hart, who appeared internationally on programs like *Larry King Live* and *Nancy Grace* to discuss the scandal. "He was a conditioned, dedicated athlete. . . . I refuse to believe anything of this nature until I hear the final version. I can't imagine Chris killing his son. I'm going to wait for a better verdict than that."

Former Stampede Wrestling photographer Bob Leonard reacted similarly. "When I look at all the people I've known in 50 years in this business, I would say Chris was one of the most stable people I've ever seen. . . . I think there's certainly a lot more to be learned here about what the circumstances were. . . . Something had to drive him to that because he was a very controlled, focused guy. . . . You never heard stories about him getting into any trouble."

Ross Hart came to Benoit's defense as well. "This would be very uncharacteristic of Chris. . . . I find it very hard to believe that he would end his life or his family's. I have to expect it was some other type of foul play."

Many in the business gravitated towards this notion at first. When police said they were investigating the case as a murder-suicide, some whispered off-the-record that Nancy might have been the killer.

But to most of those who knew the family, it seemed like the Benoits were perfectly happy. When she moved to Atlanta earlier in the year for WWE's developmental camp, Nattie Neidhart grew close to the couple.

Following the Benoit incident, WWE seemed to be in lockdown mode, more controlling of its talent than ever, and Nattie was unable to reply to interview requests. But according to her uncles Bret and Ross, she was invited to the Benoit home on many occasions for dinner, and she reported that the relationship seemed perfectly harmonious. "She told me all Chris did was dote on

his wife and he loved his kid," says Bret. "Nattie's really been rocked by this. She talked to Chris's wife just a few weeks (before the tragedy) and everything seemed fine . . . and I think she was talking to Chris a few days before."

Bret adds Chris did his part to help get Nattie, Harry and T.J. into WWE and that he "looked out for them" while they were in development. "He was almost their guiding light down there," Bret says. "They became his personal project."

Benoit always had a deep affection for the Hart family. They were his childhood heroes and the ones who gave him his first break in the wrestling game. In turn, the Harts held Benoit in high esteem. Back in October 1999, when WCW came to the Kemper Arena in Kansas City, where Owen had died less than five months before, Bret handpicked Benoit to wrestle against him in that night's main event.

"I rode with Chris and Owen a few times and I remember they were so close," Bret says. "I don't think anybody took Owen's death harder than Chris. Of course, the family did, but I think Chris was a part of our family when all that happened. . . . There was only one guy that I felt could honour Owen in this match and that was Benoit . . . .

"Me and Chris made a specific attempt to give (the fans) an old school match with holds and a great storyline, just to show you didn't need to drop from the ceiling to have a good match. You didn't need to set each other on fire. We just went out there and worked. It was hard for the first couple of minutes. People were scratching their heads because they don't see that anymore. But by about the fifteen minute mark, the place was going crazy."

Ross summed up the feelings of much of the Hart clan. "Chris is really the most significant loss (to our family) since my brother Owen," he said. "He was a hallmark of our promotion and such an international star. This is a huge blow to the whole industry and very much felt by our family."

But despite the flood of fond memories and tributes, nothing could take away from the revulsion the world rightly felt at Benoit's abhorrent act. And, in the days that followed his crime, other facts surfaced that would blacken Benoit's name forever more.

For one, it was revealed that there was a history of domestic abuse in the Benoit household. Nancy filed for divorce in 2003, at which time she also petitioned the courts for protection from domestic abuse. A few months later, however, she filed to have the divorce proceedings dismissed.[6]

A family that guarded their privacy, the Benoits put on a happy well-adjusted face for nearly everybody around them. But after the murder-suicide, ugly stories surfaced from Nancy's closest friends that Chris had grown violent over the years, becoming increasingly deranged on that all-

too-common wrestler's diet of steroids, pain killers and other prescription drugs, including anti-depressants. After the death of his best friend, wrestler Eddie Guerrero in 2005, Benoit became severely depressed and his drug use escalated. Spiraling out of control, The Crippler showed chilling signs of paranoia, not only about his position in WWE, but also in terms of his everyday life. He was reportedly convinced that he was being stalked. Nancy feared for her life. An unnamed family friend was quoted describing the Benoit marriage as a "time bomb waiting to explode."[7]

Nancy had to be somewhat tenacious in her own right. The 43-year-old brunette from Boston, born Nancy Taffoloni, had been kicking around the wrestling business since the mid-80s, when she began appearing as a beautiful and, at times, Satanic valet known as Woman, accompanying her then husband, Kevin Sullivan, to the ring.

In 1996, Sullivan, wrestling and working as a booker for WCW, conceived an angle wherein Benoit was having an affair with his wife. To make it appear legitimate, he even had the two travel together. In one of those weird wrestling instances where art imitates life, Chris and Nancy actually became an item on the road, eventually marrying in 2000. It was a joke within the wrestling world that Kevin Sullivan booked his own divorce.[8]

After the murders it was also reported that the Benoits' child had suffered from a rare condition called Fragile X Syndrome, an inherited mental impairment often accompanied by autism. It was discovered that the couple argued over child care and the boy's schooling, with Nancy pressuring Chris to be at home more to help take care of Daniel.[9] Some speculated that an already unstable Crippler snapped under the pressure. But family members denied Daniel had such a condition and, as this book was going to press, a prosecutor in the Benoit case was also questioning the boy's disability.[10]

Meanwhile, the Benoits also fought when Nancy found out that Chris had set up a new bank account in the name of his ex-wife in Edmonton, and had taken out an insurance policy, listing his ex and their two children as the beneficiaries.[11]

Another factor driving the media into a frenzy were reports that steroids had been found in the Benoit home, leading to speculation that Chris had lost his mind in the grips of "roid rage." On the defensive, WWE lashed out at such claims. After so many steroid-related deaths on the company's roster, WWE was adamant that they were enforcing a strict, anti-drug policy, and that Benoit had passed a test the previous April.

Authorities raided the office of Benoit's doctor, Phil Astin, who admitted he had in the past prescribed testosterone for the wrestler. Dr. Astin also

said that Benoit had been in his office the same day the wrestler murdered his wife. "He certainly didn't show any signs of distress or rage or anything," Astin said.[12]

On July 2, federal prosecutors indicted Astin on charges that he improperly prescribed various drugs. Although Benoit was not named in the indictment, it was revealed that in the last year of his life he was receiving a 10-month supply of steroids from Astin every three to four weeks.[13] As this book went to press, Astin had pleaded not guilty.[14] It was also revealed that Benoit's name was linked to two businesses that were the focus of a steroid trafficking operation probed by New York State narcotics agents.[15]

On July 17 Georgia's chief medical examiner told the press that Benoit's body contained ten times the normal levels of testosterone. In other words, he was full of steroids. He also had therapeutic levels of painkillers and the anti-anxiety drug Xanax in his system. Nancy also tested positive for Xanax and painkillers. In another morbid twist, Daniel had levels of Xanax in his body that indicated his father sedated him before putting him to death, presumably not wanting his beloved boy to suffer.[16] Despite the steroids in Benoit's system, however, the medical examiner said there was not sufficient proof that his actions were the result of roid rage. In fact, there was much about the incident that indicated deliberation rather than uncontrollable fury. Still, years of steroid and prescription drug abuse may well have played a part in Benoit's descent into madness and murder.

Meanwhile, in a troubling coincidence, news came from Calgary that a tag team partner of Benoit's from his Stampede Wrestling days had died around the same time as his former friend, after a lifetime of drug abuse that included steroids, pain killers and methadone. Shayne Bower, who had wrestled as Bif Wellington, died of heart failure at the age of 42.

Milad Elzein, otherwise known as the wicked manager Abu Wizal, who was on the road with both Benoit and Wellington in their Stampede days, recalls that even then the two of them were known for their prodigious intake. "At one point we called them The Mega-Doses," he says. "That's because they were doing such big doses of steroids."

Bruce Hart weighed in on the Benoit-steroids debate too, defying the other Harts when he condemned the Canadian Crippler as a "delusional juice freak." Bruce said he wasn't shocked by what happened, adding: "The last time I saw him he was in pretty rough shape mentally."[17]

Bret contradicted such claims though, arguing the steroid card was overplayed. "I never saw Chris lose his temper or act strange or weird. I don't remember Chris as being a guy who took a lot of pills or drank too hard.[18]

But no matter what explanation there was for Benoit's sick rampage, it was a dark, depressing hour for the wrestling world. Benoit was considered one of the all-time greats — not for any sort of shtick, but rather, for his work in the ring. When critics slammed wrestling for being phony, for being exploitive bottom-feeder entertainment, for being a haven for muscle-headed degenerates, Benoit was a name that could always be called upon, as an example of what was still good in the sport. The former Stampede Wrestling star's disgrace was a black eye for the entire industry.

Watching this third generation of the Hart clan — hell-bent on making a mark in the wrestling world, just like their fathers and grandfather before them — many outsiders can't help but wonder if this isn't proof that the family is as twisted as some detractors have suggested.

Even the grandkids not vying for the spotlight are still clearly enthralled by wrestlers, notably Alison's daughters, constantly at ringside for their boyfriends' matches, and Bret's daughter Jade, who at the time of this printing is reportedly dating the son of retired WWE star Ted DiBiase.

To some observers this compulsion is baffling, unhealthy even. Yes, wrestling has made the Hart family special, bringing fame and, for some, fortune, but one can't help but ask — at what cost? If you weigh it out, hasn't the wrestling business been more of a curse on the family than a godsend? Consider the losses of Owen and Davey Boy. Perhaps a raging bull like Jim Neidhart would have found some semblance of harmony in his life had he chosen another path, less fraught with temptations. Certainly Diana, Ellie and Alison would have been spared much heartache in a wrestling-free world. Did Bruce's obsession with wrestling leave him a beaten man? Even Bret experienced more than his share of hell. Would the Harts have been a unified family today had not it been for their immersion in the merciless world of professional wrestling? Certainly Stu and Helen would have died happier had their family not wrestled itself to the ground so savagely in those final years.

And now, with the Benoit tragedy, the wrestling world looked more like a vicious and bleak death trap than ever before.

I put the question to Nattie Neidhart over lunch one afternoon, before she departed for the WWE training camp in Atlanta. Why is this new generation so enticed by a business that has brought the family so much pain? Rather than fighting to get into the ring, shouldn't they be fighting to break away?

"That's a really good question," Nattie says, taken aback at first, then replying with complete confidence. "Bret and I have talked about this a lot. Wrestling has given our family life and death — literally. Bret says it's like

Hotel California. You can check in, but you can never leave."

Nor does most of the family wish to check out, Nattie asserts. "Not only is wrestling all we've ever known, it's also our comfort zone. We understand it. We get the business, even though it has changed so much. I love being around other wrestlers. I love going to shows. I love the feeling of accomplishment after a match. It makes me happy. . . . This is who we are and it's what makes us tick." Without wrestling, Nattie believes, the family is lost. "When I couldn't wrestle," she says, "there was a void in my life."

Nattie is not blind, however, to the tragedies wrestling has brought down on her family. "What happened with Owen was the worst. . . . It was like a gun going off in the room and everybody was hit. It was traumatizing and I don't think our family has ever gotten over it. We're scarred.

"But the irony is, through all of it, wrestling has kept us going. When all else fails, when the bad stuff happens — wrestle. It gives us a reason to wake up and get excited. It's the best way to move on."

She knows full well most outsiders will never understand this. But then, most outsiders don't subsist on dreams the way the Harts do. Most families don't share a single all-consuming passion that's passed down from generation to generation and clung to fiercely, even when it seems like more of a torment, dreams becoming nightmares. Long ago, when the clan's seemingly invincible patriarch chose wrestling as his life, the Hart family became defined by this bizarre world, one where fantasy and reality so often blur. For most of the family, in one way or another, this is it what it means to be a Hart, and, from the glorious highs to the most horrific lows, they're fiercely proud of who they are.

"People might look at us and say, 'Why the hell do they wanna get involved with this business?'" Nattie says. "But anything you love is worth fighting for."

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HEATH McCOY is a pop culture reporter and rock critic for the *Calgary Herald*. A lifelong wrestling fan, McCoy won gold at the 2005 Western Canadian Magazine Awards for "Butchers, Stompers & Cheats," his article on Stampede Wrestling that appeared in *Swerve* magazine.

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